

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 2011

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 566, 572:1-3, 14, 36, 568.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 8:10-18, Philippians 4:4-9, Luke 17:11-19.

Sermon Text: Philippians 4:10-20.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The day that is set aside as Thanksgiving Day is a special opportunity for believers in Christ to reflect upon all that God has done for them. We admit that we deserve nothing but God has still provided for us. He is the one who gives us the strength to do all that has to be done, earning a living, providing for ourselves and our families. He is the one who sees to it that there is food on our tables and a roof over our heads. He is the one who teaches us in Matthew's Gospel not to worry about things we need, as we read in Matthew 6:25-34: *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? 'And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

Of all the ideas that we could talk about on this Thanksgiving Day, the lessons you heard today direct us toward several thoughts.

Our Old Testament lesson reminds God's chosen people, the Hebrews, the Israelites, that they should not forget everything that he has done for them once they enter the bountiful land he promised to give them. They spent 40 years wandering around in the wilderness before God permitted them to enter the promised land of Canaan where food, shelter and safety were promised for them if they obeyed God's commands. That's a good reminder for us, too. Listen again: *"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God."* Deuteronomy 8:10

Our Gospel lesson is the familiar picture of the 10 men with the dreaded disease of leprosy. They begged Jesus to heal them. He did it and then told them to go and show themselves to the priest as the Old Testament commanded them to do if they should be healed of this disease. And of the 10 who were healed, only one turned around and thanked Jesus for this life-changing gift. The rest didn't even say thanks for this marvelous gift of God. What ingratitude!

And our sermon text follows the third lesson for today.

On Thanksgiving day especially we want to thank God – for earthly, material things he has provided for us, but more importantly for the forgiveness of all our sins and the eternal life God gives us through Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote to Timothy about the role of possessions in his life in 1Timothy 6:6-11: *"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if*

we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness." Such contentment is part of

SAINT PAUL'S PERSONAL MESSAGE FOR US ON THANKSGIVING DAY

- 1. Paul's gratitude and contentment.**
- 2. Believers' gifts show their faith in God.**
- 3. Paul's confidence that God will provide for the needs of his people.**

First, a little bit of background. Paul had received a gift from the Philippians, probably a gift of money that they had sent to him while he was under house arrest at Rome. In our text we learn from Scripture that a trusted friend named Epaphroditus arrived from the Christians in Philippi. He was going to serve as Paul's personal attendant in Rome. He had brought a gift from the congregation, and his arrival cheered the apostle with the assurance that his Christian friends in Philippi had not forgotten him. Paul was deeply moved, very appreciative, and very thankful for their gifts.

Paul did not want them to think that earthly things had suddenly become extremely important to him. Nor did he want them to think that the Lord had left him in desperate material or physical straits and especially he did not want to give the impression that he was pleading for another gift. He wanted them to realize that this gift taught him a great deal about them, their faith, and their fruits of faith.

Paul points out that the Philippian Christians, more than any other congregation he preached to, showed a special interest in his physical welfare. Now once more the Philippians' concern for him had found a way of expressing itself. As soon as they had learned about his being thrown into prison, the Philippians had wanted to do something to help. But they had been unable to do anything until now.

Paul shows his gratitude, thankfulness, and contentment. No matter what the gift, Christians always want to be grateful for any gift.

Regardless of his physical circumstances Paul tells his readers that he had learned always to be content throughout his lifetime and especially since he was called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul had experienced times of great plenty as well as times of great need. At times the Lord granted him relative prosperity, but more often the apostle had lived in less than prosperous circumstances. He served the Lord and often because he served the Lord he suffered hunger, cold, nakedness, beatings, imprisonment, and lack of the physical comforts many others would have considered necessities.

No matter what physical circumstances he faced, Paul had learned the secret of being truly satisfied, genuinely content. He had found that secret in Christ. Every day, as Christ came to him in his Word and as he came to Christ in prayer, Paul found a source of strength and a never failing contentment that could lead him confidently to declare ***"I can do everything through him who gives me strength"***.

One writer had this to say: "whatever needed to be faced or done or accomplished or suffered, Paul was confident that he could meet the challenge because he, by faith, was in Christ. Christ's grace was sufficient for him. Christ's power rested on him. Christ himself stood by him, supplying his every need. Whatever physical things the Lord chose to give to him or withhold from him, and no matter how the Lord worked in his life, he was always content, because he knew the Lord Jesus was on his side."

We too can be content with whatever the Lord gives us whether it is little or much. We can be assured that because we are in Christ by faith he is always there beside us to give us the strength he knows we need to cope with life in the world and to live our lives for him.

Not only was Paul content, he gives thanks – to the Philippians and to God – for all that he has.

Families who teach their children to give thanks to God, to give thanks to people for gifts, to write thank you notes are preparing them to live Christian lives. Such things are surely fruits of faith in the Christian.

Notice that Paul doesn't just say "thanks for the gift. I'm happy about it because I can surely use it." He says "thank you for the gift. I am glad about it because of what it says to me about you."

In deciding to give this gift, the Philippians had felt the apostle Paul's afflictions as if they were their own. This was not the first time the Philippians had shown such extraordinary generosity. Soon after their congregation was founded, they had sent him a gift to assist him in his ministry at Thessalonica, the very next stop on his second mission journey. The congregation had been and still was a particularly generous congregation. Paul often worked to support himself, but he appreciated and was thankful for what the congregations to whom he preached and taught gave him. He does make clear that although he himself doesn't expect it, those who preach and teach in the church deserve their wages. ***"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'"*** 1 Timothy 5:17-18

But as important as the gifts were, the truly important thing about any gift is not the gift itself, but the heart of the giver. It was especially because they had given their gifts in the right spirit that Paul was overjoyed. He had given them the gospel, and they had gladly received it. They had shown their gratitude for the gospel by providing the apostle Paul with material gifts that God used to support and sustain him in his ministry. Paul knew that the Lord would graciously reward that generosity as he always does, even though believers don't give for the hope of earning a reward.

Paul says his needs have been amply supplied. He rejoiced because of the fruits of their faith the Philippians gave him – their gifts to him. He compares their gifts to the sweet smelling offerings to the Lord given by Old Testament believers. Our gifts to the Lord, too, are like sweet smelling offerings to the Lord if and only if they are given out of hearts filled with genuine faith and love for him.

And so, just as they have so generously given to supply his needs, Paul assures the Philippian Christians that God, who used their generosity to bless him, would in turn bless them by satisfying all their needs. He will do it according to his riches in Christ Jesus.

It is plain that everyone who is a child of God in Christ Jesus receives God's special providence and loving care.

In addition, Jesus himself tells us that God ***"causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."*** Matthew 5:45 He doesn't only cause rain to fall on the fields of believers and stop at their property line. God provides a time of grace, their lifetime, for all men that they may have time to come to believe that Jesus Christ died for all their sins, and that by believing that, they will receive eternal life in heaven.

But God offers special promises, as here, that ***"my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever."*** Believers have the promise that God will never leave them or forsake them. He will supply their needs, richly and daily in accord with the all surpassing riches of the one to whom the whole universe belongs.

As Paul thinks about all the blessings and the care that the Lord bestows on all his children, he writes a final song of praise glorifying God. He invites all believers to join him in a constant never-ending song of praise and he closes with the word "amen" which means "yes so shall it be"!

And so we on this Thanksgiving Day close our sermon with gratitude, thankfulness, appreciation for all God has done for us both here on earth and especially preparing heaven for us in sending his son Jesus Christ so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Lord, preserve unto us this everlasting life. Amen, yes so shall it be. Amen.