

What is Enough?

A sermon in the 2017 Stewardship series “Satisfied”

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- Joshua 24:13-15 ¹³“I gave you a land that you had never worked and cities that you had not built. Now you are living there and eating grapes from vines that you did not plant, and olives from trees that you did not plant.”
- Philippians 4:11b-13 ...For I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. ¹²I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. ¹³I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Because we have the gift of Jesus in our lives, we have what we truly need – we have enough.

Every once in a while I slip into a philosophical mode. For a fleeting moment I stop taking for granted all that goes into the lives that we enjoy. So, for instance, one day I’m driving down a bumpy street. It irks me – I grumble to myself, “Gee, isn’t pavement supposed to be smooth?” Then I start to think:

“At one time this street used to be just dirt or gravel. What would it have felt like then?”

“And before that, this road probably started out as a deer path or a brief clearing in the woods, until someone made the effort to clear it, level it, straighten it.”

And then I think, “For that matter, here I am in a sturdy four-wheeled climate-controlled self-propelled contraption that’s fitted with devices to absorb the shock of the bumps before the full force of the jolts make their way to me through these cushioned leather seats. I wonder who skinned and treated the leather? Who stitched it to form a car seat that looks and feels like a little La-Z-Boy recliner?”

But my mind keeps going. “And by the way, where did this car come from anyway? Who mined the ore and loaded it onto a train or ship? Who converted the ore to steel to be pressed into car parts? Who designed all those parts? Who assembled them all into an automobile that was transported a long distance so a bank could loan me money to obtain it for my personal and unlimited use?”

Thankfully, I don’t think like that every time I get behind the wheel.... But if you do give some thought to just about any aspect of your life – the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the phone you use as a watch and camera – if you ponder what it took for you to have those things, for at least a moment you’ll stop taking for granted the life you enjoy.

Today’s Old Testament reading describes a time when people were urged to not take their blessed lives for granted. The end of the book of Joshua describes a re-dedication ceremony – as the leader of the Israelite clans, Joshua wanted them to remember how their faith in the Living God of Israel resulted in blessings they probably were overlooking, blessings they probably were taking for granted. Joshua gathered the leaders together and proclaimed, “This is what God says to you:”

“I gave you a land that you had never worked and cities that you had not built. Now you are living there and eating grapes from vines that you did not plant, and olives from trees that you did not plant.”¹

The Israelites were the recipients of goods and privileges that they hadn’t earned but simply had been given to them – God blessed them with those circumstances. Something along those lines is true for each of us, too.

- For instance, I certainly wasn’t involved in the building of this church (although a few of you were!) but we all have this beautiful, peaceful place to gather for worship week in and week out.
- We didn’t settle and map out and develop the Westshore communities into the delightful, comfortable, prosperous places that they are, but we enjoy the privilege of living and working here.
- On a grander scale, we didn’t write the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States; but through the years there have been tens of thousands of men and women who worked and served and sacrificed and died so we can cast a ballot and travel freely and engage in commerce and be educated... and choose whether or not we will worship... and when we will worship... and who we will worship.

We are the recipients of gifts that we didn’t earn, opportunities that we don’t inherently deserve – blessings that our labors and our planning and our stewardship yield to us because of the grace and goodness of God.

For each of us our situation is a unique circumstance. Some constantly have to scramble and juggle and scrape and scrimp in order for their money to make it through another month. Some have ample income from jobs or savings or family sources and don’t have to spend much time worrying about the availability of money. Often that situation changes for people as they make their way through the seasons of life – getting your first job may provide you with more money than you’ve ever seen before... until you discover the burden of covering your own monthly expenses, or you get married and discover the expense of raising children, or you start paying college tuition for a child or two or three, or retirement or disability brings a drastic decrease to your income. On the other hand, thoughtful planning and careful stewardship of your resources earlier in life may provide for a more comfortable life later on. For each of us, our financial situation is unique and it can change over time. The question is, how do we respond to our situation? Do we fret and obsess and panic and grouse? Or can we view our situation in a healthier way?

The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians as sort of a thank-you note. He was in prison (probably in Rome), accused of undermining the Roman Empire by his preaching. Paul had founded the Christian community in Philippi some years earlier. The church in Philippi was far from well-to-do, but when they heard that their founder was in prison they wanted to do something. They sent one of their own, a fellow named Epaphroditus, to attend to Paul who was suffering quite a bit in prison. Epaphroditus brought with him some sort of gift – we don’t know if it was money, or letters of encouragement, or what. Coming from the humble Philippian church, the gift was not extravagant, but it was significant, meaningful... and Paul appreciated it.

So Paul’s letter to the Philippians thanks them for their concern, their thoughtfulness, their generosity. Then Paul includes some words assuring them that he was okay:

¹ Joshua 24:13 Good News Bible

I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.²

How could Paul be “satisfied” in prison? How could he be “content” with his situation? He explained it himself: “I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.”

Christ gave Paul—and gives us—the power to be free of the worries that tie most people in knots: “Can I pass this test?” “Should I take that job?” “Will my granddaughter get her life together?” “I wish I had a new dress/car/boat/phone/house/appearance.”

Our trust in Jesus draws us in line with God’s plan, God’s will. In seeking to serve God’s will, whether we are “in need” or whether we “have more than enough” is not the determining factor for being faithful. Being “full or hungry,” or having “too much or too little” is not the determining factor. No, Christ gives us a power of spirit that gives us strength to face any condition, any circumstance. That’s why the imprisoned Paul was able to say to his financially poor but spiritually rich friends in Philippi, “I have learned to be satisfied with what I have.” Paul knew that having Christ in his life was enough.

I’ll end with this very brief story from a little book about the “true measures of money, business and life.” The author is the founder and former CEO of the Vanguard Mutual Fund Group John C. Bogle. Bogle told the story of authors Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller who were at a party given by a Long Island, New York billionaire.

Vonnegut [informed] his pal... that their host, a hedge fund manager, had made more money in a single day than Heller had earned from his wildly popular novel Catch-22 over its whole history. Heller [responded], “Yes, but I have something he will never have... enough.”³

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have enough. Enough! Like the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, we, too, realize that because we have the gift of Jesus in our lives, we have what we truly need; we have enough.

We have received what we need:

- knowing that God loves us without preconditions;
- knowing that God forgives us when we sincerely regret the wrongs and hurts and failings we’ve caused and vow to repent and do better.

We have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives us. Regardless of whether we are in need or have more than enough, it’s because we welcome Jesus to live and work within us that we are able to face all things and be satisfied with what we have.

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² Philippians 4:11b-13 Good News translation

³ John C. Bogle, Enough. True Measures of Money, Business and Life. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009, 1.