

Order of Worship for September 8, 2013, title, Lessons in Gracious Living, text, Philippians 4:10-23,
Opening Song:

Welcome and Invocation: Psalm 91
Ministry Moment:

Message Theme: God’s grace is sufficient for all our needs whether it is given to us from others or is
the Spirit’s direct working in our own souls

Worship Theme: Praise and thanks to God for His constant care of us

Opening Song:

“Awesome God”

Song # 179

Welcome

Invocation:

Psalm 91

Special Music:

“I Will Call Upon the Lord”
by Sonflower

Children’s Ministries Staff Dedication

Preparing the Heart in Song:

“Our God Reigns”

Song # 372

“I Could Sing of Your Love Forever”

Overhead

“Blessed Assurance”

Song # 572

Offering and Offertory:

“Our God” by Sonflower

Message:

“Lessons in Gracious Living”
Philippians 4:10-23 Pastor John Bronson

Closing Song:

“Spirit Song”

Song # 384

Parting Word of Grace and Invitation to Prayer

Sunday Evening in the Word:

5:30-7 pm in the Church Library
Effective and Fruitful Faith: 2 Peter 1:1-15

Sunday Evening in the Word
Effective and Fruitful Faith: 2 Peter 1:1-15
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm in the Church Library

“The Prayer Closet”

September 8, 2013

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

National and District Evangelical Free Church Offices: the Lord will give them wisdom as they provide services and counsel to local churches during these days of financial leanness and governmental and social hostility; the Lord will give wisdom and strength to the new District Superintendent, Neal Brower, as he makes contact with Pastors and churches

President Obama: the Spirit will give him wisdom relative to potential action in Syria; the Lord will intervene to prevent a continued spread of unrest and violence through the Arabic and Muslim nations; the Lord will protect the president and his family from all evil

AWANA and the Youth Ministry: that both of these vital ministries will enjoy solid volunteer support and effectively reach into both the church families and the community at large

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: SPC Cole Wagenaar, Army Reserves (brother-in-law of Augie and Pam Cervantes): that he find a full time civilian job and that he and his wife Becky find a good church to go to in Elk Grove.

Young Adult of the Week: Tim Sundahl, Butte College (son of Kirk and Marcia): that he be dedicated to studies

Please pray for our homebound family members: Fred & Jean Pauly, Gary & Ruth Lentz, Hilda Chapman

(please call the office to request updates)

1.

This is the last of our messages on Philippians. You might be thinking, “Is there anything left to talk about?” I am never at a loss of what to talk about! Next week we are going to be beginning a study in the Old Testament prophet Amos. When I teach in the New Testament I am fairly confident that most of you are fairly well familiar [with the text] because the New Testament is common ground for us. But when you go to the Old Testament some can be a bit shaky as to what was said and even where [it is to be found]. So I would encourage you to make it your business to have read through the book of Amos a couple of three times this week. It is not very long. If you do we will be able to track together pretty well as we look at this remarkably current prophecy. You will understand that when we have a chance to open the word together next week.

Pray with me if you would: Father, thank You. Thank You that You have called us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Your Son. Thank You, Father, that our lives are not defined by the despairing hopes of the world, but instead they are defined by the deathless hopes of the gospel. You have called us, Father, not just to a temporary relationship with You, but an undying one. Because we know the Father and You as the Son, our lives now are set for eternity. Thank You Father. As we look to Your word today we ask that Your Spirit would talk to us, encouraging us, and bringing the light of Your truth to shine into the darkest places of doubt and uncertainty in our own hearts. Father, by the end of this day we pray that by Your grace we might be filled up with light and carry that light into the world around us. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Looking at this concluding section of Philippians, 4:10-23, the title is “Gracious Living”. As Paul comes to the end of this letter, he gives these last observations and instructions. As we take them in, hopefully we will take them in and recognize that we have now received a body of instruction that tells us how to conduct ourselves in the world around us. That is the essence of gracious living.

Join me as I read these verses, 4:10-23.

(v. 10) *“I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. (v. 11) Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and (v. 11) I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. (v. 13) I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

(v. 14) “Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. (v. 15) And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. (v. 16) Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. (v. 17) Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. (v. 18) I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (v. 19) And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (v. 20) To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. (v. 21) Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. (v. 22) All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household. (v. 23) The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

Let us begin at the tenth verse. This verse can appear as a rather odd statement depending on how you read it. This is what he said: *“I rejoice in the Lord that now, at length, you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.”* I read it differently than I read it the first time. What the verse says depends on how you read it. So, the way I read it the second time around, some questions perhaps arise. Is Paul actually voicing a veiled complaint that the Philippians had been so slow at their support: now at length, like “finally!” In the same vein could we read the next phrase as a veiled judgment that their affections for him were too mild, too tepid to get them over whatever obstacle there might have been? Think about it, doesn’t real love

overcome all obstacles? Doesn't real love create opportunities rather than just waiting for one to appear? Recall the discussion we had a few weeks ago about the need for Christians to be eagerly committed and to have lively affections for one another. So the question is, underneath is Paul saying, "Is it really the case that you didn't have an opportunity, or was it just that you were too preoccupied with other things to pay attention to me and my needs?" Lastly could we perhaps wonder if Paul was sort of making excuses for them after having put them on notice that he was displeased, that he has noticed what they haven't done. So what do you think?

In honesty I hope that no one would ever read that verse in that manner and ask those questions. To respond to others in that way is graceless. It is to receive from others with a hostile suspicion, and we are not to do that. We are to encourage one another in the faith. We are to exercise good faith toward one another and we are to eagerly embrace the person, their words and their actions.

What do we understand Paul to actually be saying? We might get some help if we were to turn to Ephesians 5:15. Paul here again talks about the issue of time and timeliness. This is what he says to the Ephesians. *"Look carefully, then, how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."* Paul goes on in the Ephesian letter immediately to warn against what I call moral disorder: *"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery..."* Moral disorder is an especially virulent or powerful form of self-focus in which we use our resources to please ourselves in ways that we should not. Paul is not implying that the Philippians have fallen prey to moral disorder. He is not saying the reason no gift came to me from you because you had turned to self-indulgent use of your resources and therefore had nothing left over to give. Rather there is a different kind of wisdom here. That wisdom is simply this: there are opportunities for blessing others, but there are also times when there are no opportunities. When, therefore, an opportunity shows itself, take it. Don't dawdle. Act, don't wait, because there are times when opportunities are present and there are time when there are not and you do not want to let them go. Another verse from Ephesians adds urgency to this advice. In Ephesians 2:8-10 Paul writes, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship in Christ Jesus, for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* If faith is the inbreathing of salvation by the Holy Spirit into our lives, so love is the out-breathing of grace from our lives to others. There are opportunities to bless others and there are times when there are no opportunities. When the opportunity presents itself, act, don't not act, because the opportunity may go by and you are left without the means of blessing. The times are evil. We know that. Many things rush upon us and crowd in upon us, things not anticipated, not looked for. So suddenly what we had seen disappears. Jesus made the comment, did He not, *"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive."* So when we fail to take advantage of the opportunity to bless, who is impoverished? It is us! We are impoverished, not the one who didn't receive, for God never fails to take care of His own.

In the next verse, v. 11, Paul says, *"Not that I am speaking of being in need for I have learned to be content in whatever situation I am..."* (You may notice how I rearrange verses. I do that all the time, so don't get too upset unless I alter its meaning!) Here indeed is a challenge for us, is it not? How many of us struggle with contentment? Consumer capitalism is built on the dynamic of endlessly stimulated desire and the constant creation of new "needs". How many of us have spent over a thousand dollars on things we never heard of a year ago? New needs. Essential. I could not possibly live [without...]. Cell phones: I am going to have a cell phone! It is not going to have any numbers on it and I will never answer it. But what do you do? The last thing our culture wants is contented people. As in so many ways, here again Christianity's way of life is the antithesis of that which drives our culture. Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6-8), *"...godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content."* When Jesus gave the definitive prayer pattern He said, *"Father, just give us daily bread."* I have to confess when I read these statements in the context of my own possessions and even more poignantly of the things

that I desire, I have to wonder. How well do I resist the siren call of my culture that says you are only a complete person if you own...? (A cell phone with no numbers: Yes!) The issue, however, is not with what you own or how much you own. The issue is whether or not you are content. The issue has to do with contentment. The kind of contentment of which Paul is speaking is the kind that brings us freedom from the controlling desire for the goods and services which the world supplies. Am I in control or are the things I own and the things I want in control? On other occasions I have stated that a man's wealth is best measured by what he is free to give, not by what he owns. After all, beyond food and clothes, books and parchments were also in Paul's possession, but at all times Paul was content.

One of the most powerful ways our hearts are deceived is through the seduction of prosperity. It is an interesting thing about prosperity. Those who have prosperity for a season soon assume they have a right to prosperity from then on, such that if you suddenly experience a decline in the standard of your material living you are outraged and feel that this is surely unfair. “Shouldn't I have two cars? Everybody else has two cars! Shouldn't I have four TV sets? Everybody else has four TV sets! A year ago I could afford to go on two vacations; why can I not afford to go on two vacations this year?” When we assume that we have a right to some level of material wellbeing [mere] discontent is replaced by outrage, the demand that somehow things will be put right. But we are supposed to be content. Gratitude turns to assumption and to have less is seen as an offense against both what is right and what is fair.

So what do we do about this? We need to school our hearts so that we love the Giver of every good gift more than we love the gifts. And how do we cultivate a love for the Giver? How does the young man cultivate love for the woman he is going to marry? They spend time together and they talk together and they share their thoughts and anticipations for the future. Give it a try. Spend time with God; talk with Him and share your hopes and dreams for the future and let Him begin to pour His love and wisdom into your heart. You may discover a capacity for contentment you never dreamed of when you were walking on your own through the “Mall of America” where every sight and sound says, “Buy me!”

In this context, going on to verse 11, we hear Paul's disclaimer: *“Not that I am speaking of being in need...”* He is talking to people who have given him things. He is complimenting them for having done so, but he is wanting to simultaneously say, “I am so glad you did, but I want you to know that I am not in any need.” That is a difficult message to get across clearly. He does not want to discourage the Philippians in their giving or to cast doubt on the appropriateness of their generosity. He has emphasized throughout this entire letter the rightness of lively affections amongst believers, and if we have a lively affection for one another that affection is going to manifest of express itself in doing nice and kind and gracious things for one another because that is the way we are made. We do this in order to bless one another. What Paul's words were designed to do, however, was to underscore a fundamental truth and necessity for those who will be faithful in Christ. That is to be certain that I understand the sufficiency of God's grace so that if I am the only person who is overlooked when everybody else is being praised and thanked, I don't sit there in a pool of self-pity thinking to myself, “Nobody ever pays any attention to me! I am such a sacrificial servant! Why doesn't anybody ever notice?” (I practiced that quite a while!) But have you been there? The soul is easily bruised. Consequently the wound is not to be wondered at. But if we are wounded, if we cry in distress, if we feel slighted and we are hurt, rather than pouring forth bitterness and accusation, turn to the Lord and say, “I hurt; heal me! I am bruised; comfort me! I am destabilized, I am uncertain as to where I stand in the affections of those around me: God embrace me. Let me stand on the ground of Your unfailing love. Then I can draw strength and begin to breathe and I breathe in the marvelous salvation of God. It is well with me. At that point I can breathe out grace, unmerited favor, freely given love, and it is well.

This takes us to the third and probably the most obvious of the lessons in these verses at the beginning [of the closing section of the letter]. God's grace is sufficient as a standalone reality, even in the absence of the ministry of

other believers. Paul does not say what is so often said or strongly implied in our day, that a true faith in God will result in God never letting you be brought low or in need. What he says is instead, *“I have learned how to be [content even when] brought low and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.”* There is a proverb that says a man is tested by the praise he receives. This is equally true in reference to the material goods we gain. As we gain material goods, how do we respond? Do we seize or do we share? As we gain material goods, how do we respond? Do we grab or do we give? If abundance comes our way, if opportunities open before us do we whether slowly or quickly turn away from the Lord and His purpose, the people of God and the needs of others? In other words do we become captive to our prosperity? Or do we recognize that our prosperity is an open door of opportunity to begin to bless others? That is the great challenge we face in an immensely wealthy society.

If someone spends all of their time simply enjoying their possession and all that their resources bring their way, they have become a slave to those things. Please understand that a person like this may very well be a thankful slave: “I am so thankful to God for all the things that I have and they are so enjoyable to have and I am enjoying them immensely.” Indeed, this can be a tithing slave. “I am more than willing to pay back God a ten percent on the magnificent and marvelous and good things that are mine.” But if that person spends all of their time focusing on and enjoying the things that they have received, the fact of the matter is that they are slaves because they love themselves more than God. God’s grace sets us free to love others out of the abundance of the good gifts that He has given us. God’s grace opens our eyes to see the abundance, receive it, and gladly share it with others.

Now we come to what has become one of the most frequently used verses in current evangelical America, verse 13, *“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”* That is a motto verse for many. It is almost without exception used wrongly. Placed in its context, which is where it needs to be placed if Paul is to be rightly understood, Paul is complimenting God on how well God has taught Paul to put up with every condition in life. He already said it: *“I know how to abound; I know how to be abased. I know how to live high; I know how to live low.”* “We take the verse and say, “I can master every situation I face, not by learning to be low, but managing never to be low.” There is no doubt that the secret of Paul’s endurance through the amazing life that he lived for God, in which if you were to recall, he was stoned, beaten, whipped, jailed, had sleepless nights – anybody up for volunteering? Keep this in mind. How can a man live contentedly through such intense adversity and hostility? [He could] because he was wholly committed to God, and he was completely submitted. This is hugely liberating. Paul does not need success in every endeavor to be assured that God loves him. Consequently Paul can concentrate on being faithful and not worry about being successful. If there is anything that Americans love more than possessions, it is success. We teach our children that it is essential that they succeed. But God tells us it is essential that we are faithful. The drive for success destroys moral integrity because eventually under the pressure of the need to succeed you will compromise your standards and you will cut corners and you will do whatever is necessary to receive the praise of men. But God says, “I want you to be faithful.” The notion that you can concentrate on being faithful and not worry about being successful has the character of a paradox. But remember that a paradox is something that sounds like a contradiction but is not. In straightening out the paradox it is simply necessary to remember that faithfulness in the task is success in the eyes of God, whereas in the eyes of men, success has a thousand definitions which shift according to time and place and who is in charge of the game. There is not a person in the room who doesn’t know that what I have said is true. This is also true: God has won the game. So whatever game you are in, in the end, when you stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, it will not be men’s rules that determine the outcome; it will be God’s, for He has won.

This carries down into the next statement that Paul makes. Paul in verse 14 says, “Bye the way, I have been in trouble.” Do you see what he says? *“It was kind of you to share in my troubles.”* He hardly needed to mention that to the Philippians. You might recall that when he was first in Philippi he almost immediately got himself into trouble and got thrown into jail with a beating by rods on his back. Getting into trouble was sort of an unbroken

pattern by Paul. It seemed like every town and city that he went into he got into some kind of trouble one way or another. To the Thessalonians, the next town Paul went to after Philippi, Paul wrote this in I Thessalonians 3:3-4, *“You yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.”* Luke, who travelled with Paul and Silas and others a great deal of the time, wrote this comment in Acts 14:22. Paul was counseling his converts and Paul said that he was encouraging them in the faith and saying that, *“...through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”* This is the truth that may help us to understand why it is that those who give themselves over to enjoying the good things of life are so far from the will of God, even if everything they have earned they earned legitimately. The obedience of faith brings us to trouble because it is designed to bring us to the kingdom of God. And the only way into the kingdom, Paul says, is through trouble. If a life is devoted solely to avoiding trouble and pursuing pleasure and enjoyment, it is a life lived away from the will of God. What [else] can you say? We are called to live by grace through faith. It is grace that enables and trains us to live with joy, thanksgiving and love for others through times of trial and affliction. But it is graceless to only seek what is good and pleasant for yourself. May these words examine our lives and bring us to the measure of God’s purposes.

Paul’s affection for the Philippians was not entirely altruistic. The task being completed by Epaphroditus had been started long before. Philippi, as Paul mentions, was the first church in Europe, perhaps the first church ever, to extend material support to Paul. Antioch, which is the church which sent Paul out, apparently was a “sending church” but not a “supporting church” in current terminology. The Missions Committee should take note. We can quite rightly see this as the first example of a mission supporting church. Notice what Paul says: he says they have entered into a partnership in the gospel with him in their giving and their receiving. We know that when Paul established and visited churches he regularly asked for funds, but those funds were not for Paul. They were a charitable gift he was going to give to the Christians in Jerusalem. What you and I should take note of is that we have the same opportunity to enter into a partnership with those who take the gospel to places all around the world. Notice that the partnership is one of equality, equal participants and therefore equally receive the benefits of God’s good pleasure in the work that is accomplished. We have missionaries in this church serving in Malaysia, the Philippines, Tanzania, North State California, Butte County Jails, and in the Seattle area, and that is not all of them. If you want to receive – notice where Paul goes [with his train of thought] he says immediately in verse 18 that such giving and support is pleasing to God. Paul says, *“Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.”* That is an interesting phrase. A different translation is, *“...that the fruit may abound to your account.”* Just a few weeks ago, you might remember, when Vance Johnson was here from the Philippines, he stressed that the spiritual victories accomplished by him and others in the Philippines were shared by us as a congregation because of our faithful giving for some thirty years. Yes! So when the day comes and we stand before the Lord Jesus Christ He will have a book and He will say, “Ah, I see, you were consistently faithful: you supported and supported. Hallelujah; you are partners with all of those who went. You will stand together in the same place of blessing as we celebrate the great goodness accomplished by faithful people who were a part of how the gospel reached every place upon the earth. Hallelujah brothers and sisters.

This is a direct statement, by the way, supporting what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 6:19-31). Just picking out a portion, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”* Then the key: *“For where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”* If we are so in love with our material goods, if we are so enamored of our conveniences and comforts, if we are so glad and so full of rejoicing for all the good things God has given us, we are like the man who had barns and had a wonderful harvest and he said “I’ve so big a harvest I am going to tear down my little barns and build big barns and I am going to enjoy myself. I have enough for years!” And God says, “You are Mine tonight. Who therefore will receive and use the benefit of your big barns?” We are right to ask regarding the condition of our investment portfolio, but these are not limited to financial investments. We are dealing here with the heart, with what is loved,

with hope and anticipation and the sacrifice of time as much as money, with prayers and the simple discipline of remembering. In this case it is remembering those who labor in hard places to bring the gospel to the lost. This, by the way, is gracious living, letting the grace of God pour through our lives to bless others. That is gracious living.

At verse 18 Paul actually names Epaphroditus' efforts on behalf of the Philippians in their devotion to Paul. This is how he describes what Epaphroditus has done: “...a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.” What is he talking about? He is talking about bringing money from Philippi to Rome. Of course he almost died!

Lastly Paul makes this stunning statement in verse 19: “My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” Isn't that a marvelous statement? The first thing that comes to mind, however, is whether we should understand Paul to be saying is whether [or not] God intends to take better care of the Philippians than he did of himself? After all, Paul was content, but he suffered greatly. Can we really say that God has supplied all of Paul's needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ: sleepless nights, beatings, imprisonments...? As I read the verse we have to say that unless there is some qualifying statement or condition separating Paul himself from the truth that he has so eloquently stated to the Philippians, on what basis could Paul make a claim for others and do so without qualification: my God will supply? What God does, the supply that He gives, is given with His perfect wisdom. It is exactly right and appropriate to the need as God sees it. As we saw earlier, when we sought for a right understanding of verses 11-13, “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Ah, beloved, the heart of contentment is submission to God. Americans love success. Americans love prosperity. Both are perfectly understandable, and they are seductive. For like the Jews of old we run the constant hazard of falling in love not with God but with our benefits. But our benefits will never carry us to heaven, only our love for God. Paul wrote a wonderful letter to the Philippians. He delighted in that group of people. He delighted in their reception of the gospel and their quickly learned disciplines of grace. May the Lord delight in us, for as we pursue faithfulness, not success, God will give us exactly what we need, and we will be content.

Pray with me: Blessed Father in heaven, teach us the wisdom of a complete trust in You. And out of that, Father, having received much, oh may we learn to give much that others will know the blessings of so good and gracious a God. Rejoice always, again I say rejoice, for it is the Lord. In His name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you tend to suspect negative purposes behind people’s questions and comments? Do you ever think that a “disbelieving attitude” towards others tends to dampen the spiritual life of the church?

2. Have you had some special opportunities to bless others? Have you had some opportunities which you knowingly neglected?

3. As you see it, what are the greatest challenges to your being content in Christ?

4. For many the future is likely to see less material prosperity than the past. Does this seem wrong or unfair to you?

5. What material conditions and even comforts are most important to you for a sense of well-being? How would you cope if you lost them?

6. How possessive are you of your possessions?

7. What do you see as the relationship between being faithful and being successful?

8. “If a life is devoted solely to avoiding trouble and pursuing pleasure and enjoyment that is a life lived away from God and in flight from the kingdom.” What is the answer to this problem?

9. Would you like to see our church partnering with more or with fewer mission works? What works would you like to see?

10. Submission to God is the key essential for contentment in Christ. In what areas of life is submission most challenging for you?