

Rags, Riches, And Relationships

by Steve Zeisler

I would love to be known as a good letter writer, to have my correspondents collect every scrap of paper they receive from me because of the excellent wit and wisdom to be found on every page, anticipating that sometime in the future they will be able to add these to a published volume of my collected letters. Well, it so happens I'm a lousy letter writer. It requires an effort from me just to punch out basic information in my letters.

I want to recommend to you a good letter writer, though. We have been reading his work during the last two months in the letter of Philippians. This letter was written by the apostle Paul to a church in Macedonia. I suspect it took root in the apostle's mind as a thank-you note for a gift he had received, because in verse 18 of chapter 4 he says:

I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you sent.

The imprisoned apostle had been sent a gift of money, and he was thoughtfully writing a thank-you note in return.

How many of the thank-you notes sent by you after Christmas turned out like the letter to the Philippians? Paul, the great letter writer, sat down to write a thank-- you note to his friends and ended up with one of the most beloved documents in letter-writing history.

This man knew how to write letters! The great prayers recorded here, the hymn to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the tremendous wisdom on how to deal with pressure, how to deal with those who would sell out the gospel of Christ, the love, the concern, the intimacy and joy which fill this letter are testimonies to the greatness of the apostle. He wanted to thank his friends, but, realizing that he had much more to say, he put together themes which have brought joy to our hearts and to Christian hearts down through the ages.

The letter to the Philippians is characterized by the deep intimacy in the relationship between Paul and the Philippians. Early in the letter we read that both the recipients, the church in Philippi, and the senders, Paul and his friends in Rome, recognized that they were bound together in their commitment to the gospel. Because they were given to the same cause they had a very deep sense of oneness. Paul says, "I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you are all partakers of grace with me. (1:7)

Later in the book, Paul says that his own deliverance-- the sense of peace and well-being from God that would deliver him-- depended to some extent on their prayers for him. Even the statement in chapter 2 describing the incarnation of Christ began as a way of urging the Philippians to love one another more fully: "with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself." (2:3) So this book is filled with rejoicing, with agape love, with references to the believers' oneness in Christ.

Chapter 4 contains a series of directives, all of which gather around the theme of peace. In verse 7 we are told that the "peace of God shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"; and in verse 9 we read that "the God of peace shall be with you." The great shalom, the peace, the well being, the security and confidence that come from a right relationship with God is our heritage, and it should affect our relationships with one another. That is the apostle's point in appealing to Euodia and Syntyche to get along with one another. If we are really at peace with God we will be at peace with one another. We are urged to be gentle and forbearing with everyone because we ourselves are filled with the peace, the security and confidence of Christ.

Now we come to the end of chapter 4, and to what I regard as probably the original reason the letter was written-- a word of thanks to the Philippians from the apostle for a gift of money they sent him. Here we will learn some things which will help us in one of the greatest sources of tension between Christians, and that is

money. Money is one of the great enemies of peace in the household of God. Concern about money, the misunderstandings that arise because of gift giving, because God has blessed some people with great financial resources, because poor people feel ill at ease around those who have more, because the church, unfortunately, has all kinds of schemes and slick promotions to raise money and to highlight the importance of money among us -- all these things make the issue of giving and receiving a source of tension, so that the peace of God, which ought to bring harmonious relationships among us, is assailed. This letter is a thank-you note, but also it will minister to us to help us not let money divide us and make us uncomfortable with one another.

Two paragraphs in this section address the subject of giving from different perspectives. The first, verses 10 through 13, is written from the point of view of those who receive a gift, those who are in need. Speaking of himself, Paul reflects on what it is like to be given a gift, to be in need of other people's generosity. He has some important things to say about the subject of finances from that perspective and he ends with the resounding call in verse 13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

The second paragraph, verses 14 through 20, is written from the point of view of the giver, and for the sake of those who are in a position to give to others. It also ends with a ringing statement of Christian truth, "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. "

Philippians 4:10-13:

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Here the apostle is saying something that ought to make a strong impression on us. Essentially, he is saying that money is not very important. Do you know anybody who talks like that? Almost everyone says that money is critically important. You should be willing to do anything to acquire it you should spend all your time and effort to preserve it; if you have it, flaunt it, we are told. Some people, in other words, worship money.

Others say that poverty and purity are the same thing. They misquote the Scripture and say that money is the root of all evil. But what the Bible actually says is that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. These people suggest that to be righteous is to divest yourself of everything you own. No matter what your heart is like, whether or not you are kind and thoughtful toward others, poverty itself is a virtue, they say.

But Paul is saying neither of those things. What he is saying is that money is not very important at all. Things really worth doing, all that the human heart really longs for are not necessarily advanced by either poverty or riches. Hungry or well fed, in abundance or suffering need, it does not matter. Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

This is not to say that Christians should be unconcerned about the poor. If we have the love of God in our hearts we will be concerned for people who suffer because they are poor. We need to be concerned for them. But in applying these truths, in thinking through our lives, if we are mature we need to conclude with the apostle that money does not, in any sense, contribute to our freedom to love the Lord, to preach the gospel, to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, to pray with a whole heart, to praise or worship the Lord. Money, ultimately, does not contribute to a sense of self-worth. It is not really very important.

Speaking in absolute terms, I have never been rich or poor in my life. At one time, however, partly because of circumstances, partly because of choice, I had less money than I do now. Before I was married and had a wife and family to provide for, I lived with a group of Christian brothers in a tiny rental that was always overflowing with people. Scarcely a week went by when someone was not sleeping on the couch or under the diningroom table. (One of the outstanding features of this house, by the way, was that it had only a 20 -- gallon hot water tank. Showers had to be taken in 30 second bursts.) My wardrobe consisted of a couple of pairs of levis, two work shirts and cowboy boots. I had a lot of exciting adventures in rickety old cars then.

One summer Jack Crabtree and I lived in an adobe shack. Somebody said it was the oldest building in San Mateo County. There was no running water, we had outdoor facilities; our only cooking source was a hotplate that didn't work all the time; our nearest neighbor was a hippie who lived in a teepee. But that was one of the best summers in my whole life because a lot of other things were going on. Deep friendships in Christ were being made; I had an opportunity to learn as a young student in this church, an opportunity to minister and to preach the gospel.

But I have never suffered the same deep poverty that Paul experienced. At times he was utterly without resources. When he says he knows what it means to be hungry, he is not kidding. My limited experience with having less than I do now, however, confirms what Scripture is saying here, and that is that money does not contribute much; it is relatively unimportant to the things that really matter in life. If we are going to keep the issue of some having a lot of money and others not having much from dividing us in this church and from creating tension and division among Christians everywhere, we have got to devalue money and riches and decide that they are not particularly important. If I am ever in a situation where I need to receive from the generosity of others, I should do so with a sense of gratitude, not feeling demeaned in any way because, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Everything that is really worth having I already have, whether I am financially well off or not.

Ron Ritchie and I were talking the other day about a few "love feasts" we have participated in together. I use the term rather loosely. These were meals we shared in the company of other Christians through the years, special evenings when we sat at table and had good fellowship and joy in the Lord together. Some of those occasions were in expensive restaurants-- once in Jerusalem, once in Brisbane, Australia. But there were other love feasts I remember equally well, which meant just as much to me, such as a spaghetti dinner served in lumps out of a 5 -- gallon pot, with Kool--Aid to drink, or a picnic with tuna fish sandwiches. Those occasions were as fulfilling and rewarding as the evenings in the expensive restaurants because they had the ingredients that really mattered-- people. That is Paul's point here: "I know how to get along with humble means and I also know how to live in prosperity. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

The second paragraph is written from the perspective of those who have an abundance, those who are in a position to give to other people. Verse 14:

Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. And you yourselves also know, Philipians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Here we learn that when we are in a position to give to others, that is a transaction first and foremost between ourselves and God, not between the people involved. Again, tension arises in the church when people who have abundance use that abundance as a way of creating a special place for themselves, as a way of exerting pressure on people who need help. Others find wealth to be a source of embarrassment, something that cuts them off from fellowship. In these cases, giving is primarily seen as an exchange between people.

Paul uses the language of the sacrifice to explain what is happening: "What you have sent is a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." Your giving pleases the very heart of God in the same way that the Jews, who used to bring animals and grain to present before the Lord, did so as a way of representing themselves as being given to the Lord; in the same way, those sacrifices were deemed, in their time, to be acceptable. Paul is saying, "This gift you are making to the poor, to the work of evangelism, for the furtherance of the gospel, for the training of others, to share in someone's burdens, or for whatever reason is an offering of yourself; it is an acceptable sacrifice to God and it pleases him. "

Then, by way of striking reminder, Paul says, "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in

glory in Christ Jesus." If we have abundance we need to realize that that is a gift of God to us. If you have had the opportunity and education that allows you to make money, that is still the gift of God to you because you yourself did not originate the skills. You did not make yourself what you are, that is a gift to you. So even those things that we are allowed to give to other people are themselves gifts to us to begin with.

But I think Paul is speaking of something much greater still. Not only is our material abundance a gift of God, he says, but, "My God shall supply all your needs"-- every need. The freedom we have to give to other people is directly related to the blessing we receive from the Lord in every area- salvation, hope for eternity, inclusion in the family of God, security in the inner man, a sense of the profound sacrifice and love of Christ on our behalf- all of these things meet needs in the human heart, and they are all given in a glorious and rich manner.

Do you remember the beautiful gospel account of Jesus' conversation with Zaccheus? Zaccheus was a man of short stature. This, perhaps, caused him to despise himself. Acting out his negative self-image, he took advantage of his own people by working for the Romans and becoming rich as a result. But Zaccheus had tremendous inner needs. He was insecure and without friends, without hope; his wealth had done him no good at all. But Jesus, who was passing under the tree in which Zaccheus was seated, said, "Zaccheus, come down. I am going to befriend you today. I am coming to your house. I am going to put my arms around you. You are valuable." Then Jesus announced the ringing declaration,

"Today salvation has come to this house." Immediately Zaccheus had all his needs met. As a result, he was openhandedly generous in giving something in return because he realized how abundantly he had been filled.

That is the point Paul is making here. When we have an opportunity to do so, giving is primarily a response to the gifts of God to us-- not merely gifts of money, but gifts of well-- being and hope and love and the support of the Spirit of God. If we value those things at all, if they are rich gifts to us, then in some proportion we ought to be free to respond, free to worship God with an acceptable sacrifice that pleases him-- an offering of the things he has given us.

There are other guidelines for giving in this section. First, Paul suggests here that there are two categories of causes you can get involved in giving to. In verse 14, he says, "You have shared with me in my affliction"; and in verse 10 he says, "You were concerned for me." Individuals you know who are in need, and, on a larger scale, whole populations who are subject to famine, hurt and deprivation, need others to share in their troubles. Giving to people out of a concerned heart is an appropriate thing for us to do in making an acceptable sacrifice to God.

Secondly, Paul speaks of the Philippians' concern to give for the advancement of the gospel. "You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone." This category can include training for the work of the ministry, evangelism projects, teaching, making Christian literature and translations of the Bible available. This has to do with the whole business of the good news of God penetrating a dark world. That, too, is an appropriate reason to give. (I am not making this an exclusive list. I am saying these two areas are highlighted in the paragraphs before us.)

Another helpful note is to realize that Paul did not expect to be given a gift. He did not treat it as if it was something he deserved or was owed; it came to him and he rejoiced that the Philippians' concern had been awakened again. He did not assume that the time that went by without his receiving a gift was due to any unfaithfulness on their part. He says it was because they did not have the opportunity: "I do not feel I deserve this; I am not owed this gift. I am assuming that you didn't give me a gift earlier for a very good reason. You didn't have the opportunity, and that's fine with me." This kind of attitude is a challenge to many Christian workers. We treat the gifts of others as if they were Deserved, owed or earned, instead of receiving them with joy, as an unexpected blessing from God.

Lastly, Paul recalls the teaching of Christ that we can use our money now to gain true riches later; we can invest in eternity. Verse 17, "Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account." He is saying, "Your freedom to give is building up for you an eternal wealth. I'm anxious for you to have that opportunity."

Money can be a source of division, tension and frustration. It can make people ill-- at-- ease with each other. It can make them want to use one another by forgetting the person inside and relating only to his material possessions. As Christians, we need to resist that influence at every point. Money is not very important because we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. And for those who have money to give, the basic transaction is between them and God, not the individuals involved. Freedom to give is directly related to your sense of how you have been blessed by God, the God who "shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Paul closes the letter by greeting the saints at Philippi. Verse 21:

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

He uses the words, "saints " and "brothers" to describe believers in Christ. Philippians is about joyful and adventurous Christianity. Perhaps that is so because the Christians described here believed themselves to be saints-- set apart by God, destined to be like Christ-- and brothers who loved and supported one another. Those are the kind of people who are sitting on all sides of you today in this room. They are saints, they are your brothers and sisters, part of the same family because we have the same Father. If we truly believe that we belong to one another and that we are the holy ones of God, that will do tremendous things for our joy and our freedom to live as the Lord wants us to live.

Lord, we count on you to teach us what we need to know about giving. Set us free from all the tensions and divisions that can harass Christian fellowship in this area. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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