

Ready for Thanksgiving? I am. I love Thanksgiving. The turkey and dressing, the sweet potatoes and pumpkin pie. Of course, those aren't the only things that will be served up at some Thanksgiving tables. There will be a few half-baked comments from some fully-cooked relative. Careless comments and hurt feelings will take some of the thanks out of thanksgiving. It happens. People can be contentious. Christians can be contentious. And when we are, it's not a pretty sight. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built on some of the most sacred real estate in the world. Last week I was taking a group through the church when a "brother in Christ" got mad at us because he thought we were cutting in line - the four-hour line to get into the edicule that is built over the tomb. It was a contentious moment that made me think of the two ladies Paul was addressing in Phil. 4.

Euodia and Syntyche were part of the core group in the church in Philippi. It appears they had been working with Paul shoulder to shoulder from the very beginning. Somehow these women, whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life, had gotten crosswise with one another...4:2-3. These are not godless women, women who claim to be Christians but really aren't. They seem to be sincere Christian women who just weren't getting along. It happens, and when it does, we lose credibility in the eyes of the world. In this concluding chapter, Paul puts before us a choice - we can be contentious or we can be content. Let's talk about it.

We don't have the details of this conflict but we do have a few clues in this chapter about behaviors that lead to contentiousness. Let's consider the causes of contentiousness before we get to Thanksgiving dinner.

Complaining more than rejoicing...4:4. Complaining is easy. I'm an expert. I think I complain more than I rejoice. I find myself acting like another pastor, Mark Buchanan, who writes about a missions trip he once took to Uganda. He says he did not like the people he was with; he did not like the food; he did not like anything. Everyone else was participating in the worship service, but he was too upset to join in. He says, "The music sounded squawky. I was miffed at someone on our missions team. I found the food bland, tasteless. I was feeling deprived and misunderstood. I found the joy of others hollow, mustered-up. I was miserable, and I wanted to wallow in it. Then the pastor of that Ugandan church asked if anyone had something to share. One woman shouted, 'Oh, brothers and sisters, I love Jesus so much!' 'Tell us, sister! Tell us!' the congregation shouted back. 'Where do I begin to tell you how good He is to me?' the woman asked. 'Begin there, sister! Begin right there!' the congregation shouted. The woman explained that for three months she had prayed to God for shoes. 'And look!' she said, showing one of her feet. 'He gave me shoes!' The people in the Ugandan church clapped and whistled and praised God loudly. But not me, Mark said. I was devastated. I sat there broken and grieving. In an instant, God snapped me out of my self-pity and plunged me into repentance. In all my life, I had not

once prayed for shoes. It never even crossed my mind. And in all my life, I had not even once thanked God for the many, many shoes I had. Thanklessness becomes its own prison."

One of the best parts about Philippians is not what it says but the circumstances under which it was written. If anyone had reason to do a little complaining about his circumstances, it was Paul. It's not there. "Joy" or "rejoice" is -16 times.

Arguing more than empathizing...4:5. Arguments escalate when we fail to take the time to understand the other person's perspective. We fail to empathize with the other person. Empathy is...

Sympathy is saying, "I feel sorry for you." Empathy says, "I am you." Sympathy says, "I hear you." Empathy says, "I feel you." Brene Brown says, "Empathy fuels connection. Sympathy drives disconnection." Paul says it this way, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2:3-8)

Worrying more than praying...4:6. The word translated "anxiety" is *merimnao*, a word that literally means to divide the mind or to pull us in two different directions. That's what anxiety does. There are some of you who suffer from an anxiety disorder. For you, anxiety is your constant unwelcome companion. You may need to ask for help from someone who has the training and expertise to help you with your anxiety. But most of us suffer from a low-grade anxiety that can be diminished by three simple practices Paul mentions in this chapter:

1. Prayer. Prayer is a practice that unburdens our troubled minds. Peter invites his readers to humble themselves, "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." Isaiah says, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." Is. 26:3.

2. Meditation. Once I cast all my anxieties on God, I can redirect my thoughts to those qualities Paul mentions in v. 8, "whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable." Meditate on these things.

3. Thanksgiving. He says pray WITH THANKSGIVING. Gratitude literally rewires your brain. Neuroscientists have demonstrated the physical benefits of gratitude. Gratitude activates the hypothalamus which creates

dopamine which reduces feelings of anxiety. It is hard to be anxious and thankful at the same time.

Complaining, arguing, worrying, these are the practices that make for a contentious spirit. On the other hand, rejoicing, sympathizing and praying, these are the habits that make for a rich, satisfying life. But there is one surefire way to overcome a contentious spirit. The cure for contentiousness is contentment. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., observed that our society is marked by "inextinguishable discontent." We always want something better than what we have. We are never satisfied, never content, and always susceptible to the latest and greatest new thing.

Paul says he "learned" to be content. So, how can I learn to be content?

We learn contentment from good examples...4:9. Avoid complainers as much as possible and spend your time with those who exemplify thankfulness like my friend who says, "Thank you" more than anyone I have ever known.

We learn contentment through life experiences...4:10-13. Have you ever had an experience like the one I read a while back? "Every time I take a shower I stare at a good example of the persuasive power of advertising. My home came equipped with the standard fixture for a shower. It always managed to get me completely wet and adequately clean. But I kept seeing an ad on TV showing people standing under a special shower head that spun the water around and sent it pulsating over their backs. The people on the commercial were always smiling and laughing. I thought about the fixture on my shower. It didn't make me smile or laugh. It didn't make my scalp tingle or relax my neck. It just managed to get me completely wet and adequately clean. I had to have one of those shower heads that made taking a bath a holiday. The new shower fixture cost me about five times more than the one I took off. But my back is worth it right? I installed this new necessity for happiness about nine years ago. The last time I turned the dial from 'Normal' to 'Pulsating' was about 8 years, 11 months, and 3 weeks ago. Mainly it has served as a humble shower head. But it does a great job of getting me completely wet and adequately clean."

Our discontent is fueled by the myth of more. Paul's contentment was fueled by the knowledge that "My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (4:19). John Stott wrote, "Contentment is the secret of inward peace. It remembers the stark truth that we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. Life, in fact, is a pilgrimage from one moment of nakedness to another. So, we should travel light and live simply. Our enemy is not possessions, but excess. Our battle cry is not 'Nothing!' but 'Enough!' We've got enough. Simplicity says, if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

There is a lot of good stuff in this chapter but let me condense it all down to one simple exhortation - Give thanks. Give thanks not just one day a year. Give thanks not just for favorable circumstances. Give thanks for all the good things God provides. Start with the cross. The cornerstone of contentment is the cross. Because of the cross, my salvation is secure. Because of the cross I am free from the chains of sin and selfishness. Because of the cross, my future in heaven is guaranteed. Because of the cross "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). Christ has not given us unlimited strength. But we can experience contentment because He does give us supernatural strength.

This Thanksgiving take some time every day to write down at least one thing you are thankful for. Use this chapter to prime the pump of gratitude. I am thankful for "my fellow workers," "the peace of God that guards my heart and mind in Christ Jesus," "the promise of supernatural strength," "God's unfailing provision."

One of the greatest indictments against Christianity is contentious Christians who just can't seem to get along. Right about now, they are locking the doors of the church of the Holy Sepulchre at the end of another day. The one who keeps the keys to the church that covers Calvary is a Muslim. Why? Because the Christians in charge of the place could never agree on who should have the keys. Their contentious behavior got so bad that they can't even open the church to those who want to worship there. Let's not let that ever happen here.