



THE FRAGRANCE OF FAITH-FILLED SHARING Philippians 4:14-23

As we open our scripture lesson today, we observe that the Apostle Paul is very grateful for the gift shared with him by the Philippian fellowship. It touched his heart very deeply. There always was a special bond and cherished relationship between them. God had used the ministry of Paul to birth this congregation in Philippi. Paul had molded and shaped their lives in a profound way. They never forgot it. Just the mention of Paul's name caused many warm, sunlit memories to be awakened.

We know from other writings that after Paul left Philippi he labored for our Lord in nearby Thessalonika. They maintained contact with him and even supported him during a difficult moment in his sacred journey when he lacked adequate financial resources. God used them to supply needed support for Paul's ministry. Remember, Paul was a missionary at work in the field. We observe in **verse 16** where Paul shares: **"For even at Thessalonika, you contributed to my needs - not once but twice."** I had the privilege of visiting Thessalonika on 2 occasions - and went to the very spot - outside a Jewish synagogue - where Paul preached the gospel and met people. Since Thessalonika was such a strategic location on the famous highway between the East and the West and a strategic seaport - if Paul could establish a church here it would give Christianity a stronghold - and it did. Greece is one of the few Christian nations amidst the fatalistic religion of Islam in that region.

From what I learned in my travels the Philippian congregation - except for Lydia - was not a wealthy congregation - but was rich in faith and passion to support the work of the gospel - and this cherished missionary and apostle.

We have learned that one of the attitudes that produces contentment is a total commitment to a cause bigger and greater than ourselves. For Paul - this was the priority of the kingdom of God. It was this priority that allowed Paul to spend time and meet the people in Philippi and establish this congregation. They had seen this totally unselfish spirit at work in Paul in their midst - and it had been contagious. It now infected their lives - and they wanted Paul to be free to do this work in another location. Unlike the television show "Survivors", where they selfishly voted each other off the island, Paul taught them to invite others into the kingdom.

Many of you are aware of what a beautiful fragrance certain perfumes and colognes can leave in the air when worn by someone. It is pleasant and refreshing. Well this offering according to **verse 18** left a fragrance that thrilled Paul - but most importantly was pleasing to God. That is always the real motivation for missional giving. A gift – when given in love – is both a blessing to the one who gives it – and the one who receives it.

Let me share this with you church: there has never been a church that died and closed its doors because it gave too much to missions or did too much missionary work. However I can show you thousands of churches around the world - and right here in Lancaster County - who closed their doors because they had no missions and kept it all for themselves.

One of the things that our church family has been known for is its commitment to missions. If a church does not reach out - it dies out. If it does not reach up - it falls down. A church body only gets old when we let our regrets take the place of our dreams. Under Ray's leadership, our sense of local mission outreach to youth in New Holland is growing. This is the spirit of Christianity at its best. Every church had a good start or beginning. However, the Christian faith is more than a 100 yard dash - but a marathon. The Philippian congregation did not stop giving when they lost contact with Paul for a season in his missionary journeys. They probably held the money in a common purse. As soon as they reconnected with him – the gift was immediately sent.

Paul was thankful that in the midst of being under house arrest and chained to a Roman guard - that this fragrance of caring and sharing of the Philippians church was stronger than the bad odor of the persecution of the Roman Empire. Now, tell me in the year 2007 which of those kingdoms is still going strong and growing - and which kingdom and emperor is only a faint footnote scribbled on the pages of history? In the light of this information - who has the top priority in your life and mine?

Yes - every time we give our tithes and offerings for the work of God - some victory is won and some need is met somewhere. Now you can't get that kind of satisfaction from a trip to Atlantic City or the state lottery or a pool at the office.

In **verses 14 and 19** - Paul knows and teaches that the secret to his life and the resources he needed for God's work was in the power of God - not his alone. Paul knew that the real power came from God who had raised Jesus Christ from the dead - who confronted him on that Damascus road - and forever changed the direction of his life.

The late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale often shared how - as a young man before he entered the ministry - he worked on Henry Ford's assembly line in Detroit, Michigan. He literally one day ran right smack into the great inventor and car maker. Realizing this might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Dr. Peale approached him and said, **“Mr. Ford, I admire you very much and would like the privilege of shaking your hand.”**

Henry Ford did a unique thing - he warmly extended his hand and asked, “**Who is your best friend?**” Dr. Peale shared for one of the few times in his life he was speechless and motionless. Then Henry Ford pulled out a piece of paper and pencil and wrote, “**Your best friend is the one who brings out the best in you,**” and signed it Henry Ford. Dr. Peale kept the paper as a special reminder, for later on that day, he wrote the name of **Jesus Christ** on the note. He never met Henry Ford again - but he spent the rest of his life living out the fullness of love and grace of Jesus Christ.

A cherished relationship existed between the Apostle Paul and the church family at Philippi because of their common commitment to Jesus Christ that brought out the best in each other.

The greatest temptation for any Christian believer is to begin to rely on second-hand information - and a casual relationship with almighty God.

In an era when so many of the answers and models of life are negative - filled with pessimism, accepting defeat, and abounding in hopelessness, now more than ever, the simple but powerful principles of the Christian faith need to be lived out by God’s people to present an alternative to the world. That is why the witness of people like Billy Graham, Joni Erickson Tada, Chuck Colson, Phillip Yancey, and Rick Warren are such power-filled examples of the great truth Paul shared in **Philippians 4:19, “My God will supply all your wants out of the magnificence of his riches in Christ Jesus.”**

So now in **verses 20-23**, Paul brings this letter to a close. In church circles, we call it an Epistle. As we have studied and preached through this letter, we have discovered that it is certainly the most joy-filled and upbeat of all the letters the Holy Spirit inspired him to write to guide and nurture the Christian faith. I can almost see Paul signing off with a heartfelt smile and handing the letter (which was probably a scroll) to Epaphroditus.

He takes it back to a congregation that had surrounded Paul with a powerful fragrance of caring and sharing. As the letter is read before the church folks gathered at Philippi, I can almost see and feel the tears running down their cheeks - and a soft “Amen” could be heard from the lips of many.

I **know** that happened when the letter was read - because that has been my experience reading and studying this book almost 2,000 years later. This is the second time I have preached through this book - and I learned twice as much as I did when I first preached it years ago.

In **verses 20-23** Paul encourages this congregation of believers simply to keep on doing the work that God had called them to do. They were to continue to run the good race and strive towards the finish line.

We learned in **Philippians 1:6** that they could be “confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

Like Paul, when you have **faced the worst** - then focus on **believing the best** - then do what you can do - and always let God be God.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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