

LEARNING TO BE CONTENTED AND MATURE (Philippians - Lessons for the Journey)
Philippians 4:10-20 - August 23, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

If you were here, or listened online last Sunday, you know I complained about my dental problems, and how I've unintentionally taken up grinding and breaking my teeth as a self-destructive nighttime habit. I'm going to Dentist again tomorrow. Well, a couple of really nice people who heard the sermon tried to help me out telling me that is just another sign of old age coming on. They also pointed out that my little beard is getting more gray each day. I replied, *"You're part of the reason I grind my teeth and have more gray hair."* Just kidding.

Well it did strike a bit of a nerve, because next Saturday it is my 60th birthday. I know people have diverse definitions of old age, especially as they get older themselves, but I think it is safe to say that now I'm well past middle age (unless I hope to live more than 120 years - which sounds terrible based on my current rate of deterioration!). I know many of my role models in this church are much older, and think I'm a youngster, but I can't deny that I'm getting old.

In his book, Laugh Again, Charles Swindoll tells of an elderly woman who wrote a friend a humorous description of her own aging and said:

Remember, old folks are worth a fortune - SILVER in their hair, GOLD in their teeth, STONES in their kidneys, LEAD in their feet, and GAS in their stomachs. I have become a little older since I saw you last, and a few changes have come into my life since then. Frankly, I have become quite a frivolous old gal. I am seeing five gentlemen every day. As soon as I wake up, Will Power helps me get out of bed. Then I spend some time with John. Then Charlie Horse comes along, and when he is here he gets a lot of my attention. When he leaves Arthur Ritus shows up and stays the rest of the day. He doesn't like to stay in one place very long, so he takes me from joint to joint. After such a busy day I'm really tired and ready to go to bed with Ben Gay. What a life!

P. S. The preacher came to call the other day and said at my age I should be thinking about the hereafter. I told him, 'Oh, I do that all the time. No matter where I am - in the parlor, upstairs, in the kitchen, or down in the basement - I ask myself, what am I here after?'

Growing older IS unavoidable as the years pass, but GROWING UP is not. I know people of all ages, even older adults, who are terribly immature. Maturity - especially Christian maturity - is a matter of choice. God makes it possible, but God won't do it unless we participate in the process. The good news is that God wants to help us mature - or GROW UP into holiness. The Holy Spirit mentions this repeatedly in His book - what we call the Bible.

Ephesians 4:14 reveals a goal of God, which is that,

"The body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Hebrews 5:14-6:1 says,

"But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward [or press on] to maturity..."

When we are assessing our forward movement there are several indicators as to whether or not we are maturing as we should. For example, I would say maturity is present when “balance” replaces “extremes” or when good choices replace bad ones. Chuck Swindoll suggests several other characteristics of a maturing Christian. He says we are maturing...

- When our concern for others outweighs our concern for ourselves.
- When we detect the presence of evil or danger before it is obvious or becomes a habit.
- When we fight the devil more than we fight with other people (especially in the church)
- When we have wisdom and understanding as well as knowledge.
- When our awareness of needs is matched by our compassion and involvement.
- When we have the willingness to change, once we are convinced that correction is in order.
- When we have the ability to grow spiritually by feeding ourselves from the Word of God.

We could go on and on but I think a good way to understand maturity is by example - by seeing it in the life of another person. I believe the Apostle Paul is a great example of a maturing disciple, he starts off small and shaky, but eventually he is larger than life and very solid in his faith and Christ-likeness. In this last text in our series on Philippians Paul shows some other key qualities we should embrace if we want to GROW UP or mature spiritually.

1. First of all Paul shows us his maturity with his practice of affirming others.

In verse 10 we can see that he affirmed the Philippians for their thoughtfulness in meeting his needs by sending a monetary gift with Epaphroditus. In verses 15-17 he affirms them for doing this in the past, when he was in Thessalonica. As you may know, Paul planted the church in Philippi, then he went to Thessalonica, which was nearby, to start a church there. From Thessalonica Paul’s missionary work took him south to Berea and then on to Athens. Eventually the Christians at Philippi lost track of Paul since he was constantly on the move and communications back then were uncertain and slow. This is what Paul meant in verse 10 when he said, *“You were concerned for me but lacked opportunity...”*

While on his third missionary journey, Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Many years had passed since he started the church in Philippi but their mutual love was still strong. News eventually reached Philippi about Paul’s location and imprisonment. They knew he couldn’t work as a tent maker to earn his own living. Under house arrest he had to pay for his own food and clothing, so he was struggling. In response the Philippians collected funds and sent them to Rome as quickly as possible. So here in his letter Paul affirmed them for their continual thoughtfulness and sacrificial giving. He told them their gift was a fragrant offering and sacrifice, pleasing to God - in other words he affirmed their Godliness, faithfulness, and love.

Paul did more than thank them for what they had done, he affirmed them for WHO they were, and I believe that IS a mark of Christian maturity.

When I was in seminary, I had to read all the books of Fred Craddock, who was then a famous teacher, author, and preacher. He wrote about when he and his family went to Gatlinburg, Tennessee for a vacation. One night they went to a restaurant that looks out over the Smoky Mountains. As they were dining, a distinguished looking, older man, who seemed to be the proprietor, moved from table to table speaking to the guests. Craddock acknowledged that he was a private person, and particularly on vacation, he didn't want to be interfered with.

So he looked at his wife and commented, *"I hope he doesn't come over here."* Then he was somewhat resentful as the old man made his way to their table and began to talk to them.

"Where are you all from?" the old man asked. Craddock answered, Oklahoma. Then the man asked, *"What do you do for a living?"* Trying to hide the fact that he was a minister, and the inevitable questions, Craddock replied, *"I teach homiletics in the graduate seminary of Philips University"* (thinking the man wouldn't know that homiletics means the study of preaching). The old man replied, *"Oh, so you are a preacher! Well I have a preacher story to tell you."* And with that, he pulled up a chair, and Craddock winced at what was to come.

The old man said, "I was born in 1870 just a few miles from here, across that mountain. My mother was not married at the time....and the reproach that fell on her fell on me as well. They had a name for me when I started to school, and it wasn't nice. I can remember going off by myself at recess and at lunchtime, because the taunts of my peers cut so deep. What was even worse was to go into town with my mother on Saturday and feel all those eyes literally piercing thru me, and realize they were asking, *"I wonder who his father is?"* When I was about twelve, a new preacher came to the little church in our community and people began to talk about his passion and eloquence. I was curious so I began to go to church myself, although I always slipped in late and tried to get out early because I was afraid that people would say, *'What's a boy like you doing in a place like this?'*

Well one Sunday, the benediction got said quicker than I realized, and I found myself caught with a lot of people crowding around. Before I knew it, there stood the preacher, looking at me with those burning eyes of his. He said: *'Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?'* And I thought to myself, *'Oh, no....here we go again!'* But then a smile of recognition broke across the preacher's face and he said, *'Wait a minute... I know who you are! I see the resemblance! You are a child of God!'* And with that he patted me across the back and said, *'Boy, you've got quite an inheritance! Go and claim it!'* The old man said, *'That one statement, literally changed my life.'*

By this time Craddock was enthralled by the story and asked, *"What's your name?"* The old man replied, *"I'm Ben Hooper."* Craddock said to himself, *"Ben Hooper? Oh yes! I recall how my grandfather used to tell me that on two occasions, the people of Tennessee elected a man - born illegitimate - to be their governor, and his name was BEN HOOPER."* It all started when a mature man of God affirmed a small boy by saying, *"I know who you are. I see the resemblance. You're a child of God! You've got quite an inheritance! Go and claim it!"*

Have you ever been affirmed like that? Has anyone ever made you feel secure and proud and grateful simply because you were God's beautiful creation...worth more than the precious blood of Christ... and called according to God's purposes? I have, and it feels wonderful. My life has been changed for the better by people who know how and when I need affirmation. This practice of affirming others - for who they are in God's eyes - is one sign of maturity and it is a quality that all Christians, young and old should embrace.

2. Maturity is also demonstrated by the ability to be content in all situations of life.

Remember verse 11 where Paul writes, *"I have learned how to be content with whatever I have."* To Paul it didn't unravel his sense contentment if he was free or bound to a soldier, or if the day was hot and humid or bleak and frigid, whether his stomach was full or empty, or whether the Philippians sent a gift or failed to make contact. All that is to say, Paul had a sense and source of contentment that was independent of his circumstances.

Paul reveals that Contentment is not about what you have. It is a faith-filled attitude.

In 1 Timothy 6:6-11 we read,

Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.

Paul gave wise instruction to Timothy. He told Timothy that we start with nothing and we end with nothing. So, contentment is not about what we accumulate, it is about finding an eternal relationship that gives us a satisfaction that is independent of our circumstances. Paul said he learned a secret about being content at all times - well what is it? I think Paul reveals the secret in vs. 13, *"I can do all things, through Him [Christ], who gives me strength."*

Our contentment is anchored to our relationship with Christ. No matter what the circumstance we know that we are getting better than we deserve. We deserve eternal punishment but are given eternal life in Christ. We deserve to be cast from God's presence but we are declared to be part of His family. Do you understand what a treasure this is?

There is nothing that compares in value to what we have been given by God's grace.

Malcolm Muggeridge was one of England's most articulate journalists. He summed up his pursuit of pleasure and how he finally found contentment in Christ.

I may, I suppose, regard myself, or pass for being, as a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets - that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Internal Revenue - that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions - that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time - that's [influence]. Yet I say to you - and I beg you to believe me - multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing - less than nothing... - measured against one [drink] of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. [M. Muggeridge Jesus Rediscovered]

Years ago I read a great book by Fred Buechner, which offered a short meditation on the 23rd Psalm which comes to mind whenever I read, *"I can do all things through Christ."*

"I SHALL NOT WANT," the psalm says. Is that true? There are lots of things we go on wanting, go on lacking, whether we believe in God or not. They are not just material things like a new roof or a better paying job, but things like good health, things like happiness for our children, things like being understood and appreciated, like relief from pain, like some measure of inner peace, not just for ourselves but for the people we love and for whom we pray. Believers and unbelievers alike we go on wanting plenty our whole lives through. We long for what never seems to come. We pray for what never seems to be clearly given. But when the psalm says "I shall not want," maybe it is speaking the utter truth anyhow. Maybe it means that if we keep our eyes open, if we keep our hearts and lives open, we will at least never be in want of the one thing we want more than anything else. Maybe it means that whatever else is withheld, the shepherd never withholds himself, and he is what we want more than anything else. (Originally published in The Clown in the Belfry).

More succinctly the secret to contentment is this: JESUS + NOTHING = EVERYTHING

I think that means that if the Lord is your treasure - you will never go bankrupt! I think that means that if the Lord is your dwelling place then you can never be homeless. If the Lord is your hope then no thing or no person can take your positive future away from you. If the Lord is the lover of your soul you will never be finally alone. I think this means that whatever else happens in life - because of Christ - God is with us and for us forever.

Like Paul, mature individuals have also learned to have confidence in God's power.

There were people in Paul's culture who also learned to be content in their own way. We refer to them as the **Stoics**. They trained themselves to be hard, and self-sufficient and stable, willing to be content with whatever life threw at them. To a degree, Paul shared their emphasis on contentment, but with a significant twist. For Paul it wasn't self-sufficiency but **Christ Sufficiency** that helped gave him a sense of contentment.

You see there are two ways to handle pressure. One is illustrated by the bathysphere, which is a miniature submarine. It is used to explore the ocean in places so deep that the water pressure would crush a regular sub like a tin can. Bathyspheres compensate for the pressure with a steel hull that is several inches thick. When scientists in bathyspheres reach the ocean floor, however, they find they are not alone. When the outside lights are turned on and they look out the thick windows, they see fish. These fish cope with extreme pressure in an entirely different way. They don't have hard and thick skins; instead they are elastic and nimble. They compensate for the pressure outside through equal and opposite pressure from inside. In a similar way, maturing Christians aren't hard, thick-skinned stoics. They are moved by and responsive to the needs around them. They care about what happens to others. They have learned to rely on God's power within to enable them to withstand the pressure from without.

This word translated "strength" here is a rare word in Greek, but Paul used it often.

- 1 Timothy 1:12 says, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, Who has STRENGTHENED me."
- 2 Timothy 4:17 says, "But the Lord stood with me, and STRENGTHENED me."
- Ephesians 6:10 says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the STRENGTH of His might."

The word means to infuse strength or to put power into. This strength, was not something Paul conjured up from within. No it was a power that was infused into his life because of what Christ makes possible. In was the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit in him. Paul's statement in verse 13 was not an expression of self-confidence but rather God-confidence.

3. Mature believers give sacrificially to meet the needs of others.

The Philippians gave generously because they had discovered that giving sacrificially honors God and enriches the giver. In verse 17 Paul pointed to this principle when he exclaimed, "*Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.*" He was speaking of the blessing and reward found in giving. Paul and the Philippians had experienced first hand the truth of Jesus' words when He said, "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*" (Acts 20:35)

Maxey Jarman of Nashville, Tennessee, who died at the age of seventy-six, was an internationally known Christian businessman. He took a company from seventy-five employees to 75,000 employees. In the late 1960's his company, GENESCO, was one of the world's largest apparel companies. During his heyday, Maxey Jarman gave away millions. He built churches around the world and gave generously to all kinds of Christian causes.

Then, he experienced financial reverses. He lost his company and most of his personal fortune. During the darkest days of his financial crunch, he was asked by a personal friend if he ever thought of the millions he had given away over the years. Jarman answered, "*Of course I have, but remember, I didn't lose a penny I gave away. I only lost what I kept.*"

That is one paradox of Christian Discipleship. What we give for the Lord, we get to keep. When we are willing to empty ourselves for the Lord is when we become full. The act of giving always helps us to trust God more. It deepens our relationship with Him so we are blessed. Paul knew that the Philippians' giving to him materially would open them up to God's giving to them spiritually. We need to grow in this direction because another secret of maturity and contentment is learning to a generous giver.

So to sum up -

- Maturing Christians practice affirming others and showing them love and gratitude.
- Maturing Christians are learning to be content in all circumstances - through Christ.
- Maturing Christians give sacrificially to meet the needs of others.

This morning we have completed a lengthy two-month study of the book of Philippians. I hope you have benefitted as much from hearing these messages as I have from preparing them.

Next we're going to move into an emphasis on **mission outreach** until the end of September. The series will be based on the membership vows of our church - which call us to invest in the work of God with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, and as we do the mission of Christ in our lives and through His church will be better accomplished.