

This Thursday we will celebrate one of our favorite American holidays – Thanksgiving. A time when we gather with family, friends, and neighbors to enjoy a meal of turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pie followed by hours of football and indigestion, and for some early shopping trying to get the jump on the Black Friday sales.

One Thanksgiving, a food editor at the local newspaper received a call from a woman inquiring about how long to cook a 22-pound turkey. “Just a minute,” said the food editor as she turned to consult her chart. “Thank you very much,” replied the novice cook as she hung up the phone. I sure hope you will cook your turkey a little longer than that!

An airline pilot was flying over the Tennessee Mountains and pointed out a lake to his copilot. “See that little lake down there? When I was a kid, I used to sit in a rowboat on that lake fishing. Every time a plane would fly overhead, I’d look up and wish I was flying it. Now I look down at the lake and wish I was in the rowboat fishing.”

Contentment can be an elusive pursuit. We go after what we think will make us happy only to find that it doesn’t always work; in fact, we were probably happier before we even started the quest. It’s like the story of two teardrops floating down the river of life. One teardrop said to the other: “Who are you?” “I’m a teardrop from a girl who loved a man and lost him.” “Well, who are you?” “I’m a teardrop from the girl who got him.”

The apparent lack of contentment in our lives and our nation today is reflected in many ways. We see it in our high rate of consumer debt. We aren’t content to live within our means; so, we go into debt to live just a little bit better than we can afford, but then we suffer anxiety from the pressure of paying all our bills. We spend money that we don’t have on lottery tickets hoping to win a big jackpot despite the overwhelming odds against it. Of course, the advertising industry tries to convince us that we can’t be happy unless we have their product. A sign in a department store window stated: “Make this the Christmas that your spouse will never forget; charge everything!” And a lot of times when we take the bait, we discover that we really didn’t need what we bought. Has that ever happened to you? Is your garage full of stuff you thought you needed at one time?

We live in a world where bigger is better; bigger houses, bigger and faster cars, the latest smart phones, a large screen TV, the latest advances in technology, appliances that can do everything but wash the windows. We have to have what our neighbors have; you know the old saying, keeping up with the Joneses. This attitude is spelled out in a bumper sticker that read: “The one who dies with the most toys wins.” We live under the false assumption that the more we have the happier we will be. We think that if I only had that I would be happy.

One day in a store, a man heard a little girl crying and screaming. She was so loud that the man ran over to see if she had fallen down and hurt herself. She was about four years old just crying her heart out. Next to her was a younger boy quietly chewing some gum. Her mother was trying to calm her down. Through her tears she told her mother that she had gotten a white gumball and her brother had gotten a red gumball. The little girl wanted the red gumball, not the white one. When she demanded that her brother give her the red one, of course, he just popped it in his mouth and started chewing. That really set her off!

Now there may be some difference in the flavor of red and white gumballs, but it isn't that much. Both gumballs will be sweet for a few minutes, but then both are basically tasteless. But the little girl could not be convinced of that tiny difference. She was sure that she had to have the red gumball that her brother was chewing. You may have experienced this in your family as you tried to buy gifts for your children and grandchildren. Of course, this desire to have what others have is not restricted to children. Much of the unhappiness in our lives today is due to not being content and thankful for all that God has already graciously blessed us with.

In the fourth chapter of his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul states that he has found the secret of contentment that we have all been searching for. Listen to his advice from verses 11 through 13.

Read Philippians 4:11-13

To fully appreciate what Paul is saying here, you need to understand that he is writing this letter from a cold dark prison cell in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier, facing the possibility of execution. In addition, consider all that he had faced during his life as a missionary for Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul tells us that he had received forty lashes five times, been beaten three times with the rod, stoned once, shipwrecked three times, spent a day and a night adrift in the open sea, and faced all kinds of dangers because of his witness for Jesus Christ. Yet he states with all the confidence in the world that he is content with whatever he has and wherever he is.

Can we say the same this morning; that we are content with what we have and where we are in life; that we are thankful for everything going on in our lives when there are people all over this world this morning in far worse conditions. Did you know that one-third of the world population lives on less than \$1 per day; that three-quarters of the people live on less than \$10 per day? Yet we complain about the price of gas, eggs, and other things as we live in what the rest of the world and certain parts of New Mexico would consider luxury.

How often do we complain about what we don't have, when compared to the rest of the world we are truly blessed. Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, tells the story about a poor woman with two children who had no bed for them to sleep in and scarcely enough clothes to

adequately cover them. In the depth of winter, they were freezing, so the mother took the cellar door off its hinges, and set it in the corner of the room to create a shelter for them from the cold air. When their mother complained about the situation, one of the children whispered to her: “Mother, what do those children do who don’t have a cellar door to put in front of them?” Even in the worst situation, this little child found something to be thankful for. We can all take a lesson from this child. True contentment is not having everything, but in being satisfied with everything you have.

In verse 11, Paul tells us that he has learned to be content in all situations and conditions. Now this didn’t come naturally to him back then or especially to us today; there is no instant transformation. It is a process, something that we can only learn by walking in faith and trusting in the Lord each and every day. Key to this process is understanding that everything, big and small, is under God’s control. He will use all the situations in our life to teach us how to live if we will only submit to Him and trust in Him, walking in faith.

Paul’s assurance that God would meet his basic needs was based on Jesus’ promise in Matthew 6:33 – “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Here the phrase “all these things” refers to our basic needs - what we need to eat, drink, wear. Jesus was teaching that if we stay focused on serving Him and growing spiritually, God will take care of our basic material needs. This is what we pray for in the Lord’s Prayer when we say: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

Please note that Jesus promises to supply our basic needs, not our greed; our daily bread, not cake! Most of us living in America have far, far more than we need. We live in relative luxury compared to the rest of the world. Sometimes we need to remember that people in some countries squeeze ten family members into a one-room, dirt-floor shanty.

There’s a story about a Jewish man in Hungary who went to his rabbi and complained: “Life is unbearable. There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?” The rabbi replied: “Take your goat into the room with you.” The man questioned this advice, but the rabbi insisted: “Do as I say and come back in a week.”

A week later the man returned looking even more upset than before. “We can’t stand it,” he told the rabbi. “The goat is filthy.” The rabbi said: “Go home and let the goat out, and come back in a week.” A week later the man returned, smiling and said: “Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it together now that there’s no goat and there’s only the nine of us.” The point of the story: it all gets down to your point of view; your attitude in life. Contentment in life consists not in great wealth, but in simple wants.

Another secret of contentment is positive thinking, looking for the good in every person and every situation. In the preceding eighth verse of Philippians 4, Paul tells us: “Whatever is true,

whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” To enjoy life, you need to avoid negative thoughts, and for that matter, also negative people. Have you ever met someone who is always complaining, finding fault with everything, and has nothing good to say about anybody or anything? You know the ones who look like they have been baptized with vinegar. These are the same people that if they had seen Jesus walking on the water on the Sea of Galilee, they would have complained that He didn’t know how to swim. If you want to be content and happy, stay away from those people!

Paul says that he had “learned the secret of contentment while being well-fed and going hungry, both in having abundance and being in need.” That secret is clearly stated in verse 13: “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.” Paul had learned to be God-sufficient, not self-sufficient. He could face anything, because in every situation he had Jesus; and the person who walks with Jesus can cope with anything. When we lean on Jesus, He gives us the strength to handle any situation; the peace to calm our hearts in difficult times; the hope that abides; and the ability to be content with our current situation.

Paul is telling us that we need to learn not only how to get along in times of need, but also how to live when we have more than enough. In times of need, we are tempted to take our eyes off the Lord and worry. That’s when we need a trusting heart. Likewise in times of abundance, we’re tempted to forget our dependence on the Lord and trust in our own abilities instead of Him. That’s when we need a thankful heart that daily acknowledges our gratitude for all the many blessings of life. Thanking God for our daily bread, even when we have enough in the bank for many days of bread keeps us humbly trusting in Him in times of plenty.

Legend has it that a wealthy merchant on learning about the Apostle Paul was determined to visit him. So, when passing through Rome, he got in touch with Timothy and arranged an interview with Paul in prison. Stepping inside his cell, the merchant was surprised to find the apostle looking rather old and physically frail, but at once he felt the strength, the serenity, and the magnetism of this man who relied on Jesus Christ for his all in all.

They talked for some time, and finally the merchant left. Outside the cell, he asked Timothy: “What’s the secret to this man’s power? I’ve never seen anything like it before.” “Don’t you know?” replied Timothy, “Paul is in love.” The merchant looked puzzled. “In love?” he asked. “Yes,” said Timothy, “Paul is in love with the Lord Jesus Christ.” The merchant looked even more bewildered. “Is that all?” he asked. Timothy smiled and replied: “That’s everything!”

This passage from Philippians is an appropriate text as we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this week. Because one of the results of contentment is an attitude of gratitude, a thankful heart. Paul calls us to count our blessings and to give thanks with a grateful heart. We will now

close with a traditional Thanksgiving hymn, "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come," that was written in 1841. It has been sung throughout the years in large and small churches, in rural villages and big cities, by talented singers and people like me who can't carry a tune. It calls us to be a thankful people, people who put their trust and lives in God's hands; people who live each and every day thankful for all the blessings that God bestows on us.

I found this quote that sums it all up: "As you travel down life's pathway, may this ever be your goal: keep your eye upon the doughnut, and not upon the hole!" During this holiday season, let's remember to give thanks to God with a grateful heart. Let your face and your heart reflect the love of God in your life. Discover the secret of contentment; fall in love with the Lord Jesus Christ. Happy Thanksgiving!