

Devotions for Sept. 19 – 25, 2011

Monday, September 19, 2011: *Gratitude* Daily reading: Philippians 4:10-14

A primary reason Paul writes his letter to the Philippians is to express his gratitude for their monetary gift in support of him and his ministry. "At last you have revived your concern for me" sounds harsh in English, implying that the Philippians had at one time lost their love for Paul. That sense is not present in the original Greek. Instead, in verse 10, Paul lets the Philippians know that he is well aware that they, for whatever reason, had been previously unable to support him, and he holds no ill will toward them. He is only grateful. Gratitude comes when we begin to recognize the goodness of God toward us, and the goodness of others. Goodness and gratitude become a cycle: more goodness = more gratitude. More gratitude = more goodness. Where are you seeing God's goodness in your life? Ask God to make you more grateful today.

Tuesday, September 20, 2011: *Contentment* Daily reading: 1 Corinthians 9:11-18

Paul doesn't like to accept financial support from churches he serves; he doesn't want to be accused of doing ministry for money. He also wants the Philippians to know that he completely trusted God to provide what he needs. In fact, Paul has learned how to be content with whatever he has. Contentment must be learned, because it is not a natural human response. In Greek, the word contentment means to be self-sufficient, having no need to rely upon others. Paul has learned to be dependent upon Christ alone. Paul's sense of contentment is quite different than the kind of contentment that Stoic philosophy taught in Paul's day: a kind of passive acceptance of whatever came, a deep self-reliance. How can you learn more contentment? Maybe you need to unlearn selfishness and the desire to accumulate. Ask God to help you learn contentment today.

Wednesday, September 21, 2011: *Poverty and Plenty* Daily reading: Philippians 4:10-14 (again)

Paul has experienced the gamut in his lifetime, both poverty and plenty. He does not exalt one over the other, because what he has or doesn't have isn't important to Paul. What matters is that Christ has him in a grip of grace. Paul trusts that God will provide whatever Paul needs for each day's work; not only his physical needs, but his emotional needs, as well. In this, he finds peace and contentment. *The Message* says it this way: "I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am." Write this on a post-it note, place it on your bathroom mirror, and meditate on this phrase this week. Ask God to make this sense of contentment real for you.

Thursday, September 22, 2011: *Grace and Mercy* Daily reading: Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus is not teaching people how to run a business here. This is a parable about the Kingdom. At its core, Jesus is teaching that our sense of fairness, in which all people get what they deserve, isn't God's way. Rather than fairness, God prefers two very unfair principles. First, there's mercy. Mercy means withholding the punishment that someone deserves. Second, there's grace. Grace means giving people what they don't deserve. This is primarily a parable about grace. Jesus probably tells this parable to explain the Kingdom inclusion of people who are traditionally excluded: tax collectors and other notorious sinners! Matthew might include this parable to address the influx of gentiles into the early church, which was dominated by Jewish converts. Either way, it's all about grace. Where are you experiencing unfairness in your life? Ask God to help you embrace grace and mercy today.

Friday, September 23, 2011: *Last First* Daily reading: Matthew 19:23-30

The parable of the workers in the field illuminates the meaning of Jesus' often-used phrase: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." In fact, these words bracket the parable. At least one way to understand these words is to reflect on our focus. Where is it? Do we put ourselves first, obsessing about what we want, what we think we deserve, what we have or don't have? If so, most of us are going to be profoundly discontented in life. If we simply receive all that God provides as a gift, grateful in knowing that we deserve none of it, we'll discover the secret of contentment and joy that Paul knows. In God's upside-down economy, things are different. The losers win. Outsiders become insiders. The humble are exalted. The meek are glorified. The weak are strong. The poor are rich. As you live through this day, view the world through the eyes of God and envision that day when the last are first. Ask God to guide you.

Saturday, September 24, 2011: *Which?* Daily reading: Hebrews 13:5-8

Our entire economic system is based on convincing us to not be content, to believe that we need and deserve more than we have. The workers in Matthew's story reflect these ingrained attitudes beautifully. Jesus confronts those attitudes with God's incredible generosity, and Paul gives flesh to these Kingdom values. If the Spirit confronts people through these texts, core questions become, "Which of these people do I believe God made me to be? Do I want to be a disgruntled worker or a contented Paul?" While contentment is a gift, it is also learned. We need to hear often of God's fabulously unfair generosity, giving us life and all good things. Ask God to lead you down the road of contentment today.

Sunday, September 25, 2011: *Steps* Daily reading: Matthew 7:7-12

Here are some steps we can take toward greater contentment. Choose to see all things as gracious gifts from God, not something you own, have earned, or are entitled to. This is the first principle of stewardship. Every day, express gratitude for what you do have, and resist coveting what others have. Ask for wisdom to wisely use and invest what God has placed in your care. Practice generosity, modeling your life on God's generosity. Pray for grace to let go of the desire for what you don't have. Then, trust God to meet your needs. Can you take one of these steps today? Can you take another step tomorrow? Maybe someday will come when you are truly contented and you'll look back and marvel how God has changed your heart. Ask God to lead you into taking one of these steps today.