



WESTMINSTER
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The Prison of Want

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Philippians 4:10-20

Paul is in prison. And in those days, prisoners, their family, their friends, had to pay their own way. And the Philippian church had stepped up to pay the Apostle Paul's way.

There had been a time when the Philippians had been cut off from Paul, and they couldn't help him. But they had renewed their efforts to support this man who had founded their church.

But Paul wants them to know that as much as he appreciates the gift, his contentment, his satisfaction, is not based upon either giving or receiving, of having or wanting.

Look at verses 10-11: *"I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have."*

There is our word: Content. It is *autarkes*. It means "enough." To be satisfied. To be content.

Paul's closing words in his letter to the Philippians are meant to inspire, *"to be content with whatever I have."* But I find many people, rather than being inspired, are haunted by these words.

Beverly is a pediatrician and served as a public health specialist in the Punjab region of India for the Presbyterian Church.

At a conference, she told a story about the first time she traveled to India, to begin her work for the church as a medical missionary.

She had taken a large number of things with her: clothing, medical supplies and equipment, books, and a few little things to remind her of home.

She was in a train station, getting ready to have her things loaded on a truck to go the last leg of the journey, to where she would live. The people who were taking her had gone to get the truck, and she was left there with her pile of stuff.

They told her, "Don't you dare let this out of your sight! In this train station, if people find an unattended bag, it will be gone just like that!"

She said she was looking around, wondering who was trying to sneak up and steal her stuff; but as she looked around the waiting area of the train station, off to one side by the wall, she said she saw a thin, hungry-looking mother and a sick, hungry-looking child.

Her first impulse, as a doctor, was to get up and go to this woman. But she knew, "I can't leave my stuff, or somebody will steal it; and I need this equipment, my books, my clothes. It would take too long to get replacements."

But everything in her missionary heart wanted to go to that woman and child, and offer God's love to them and some healing touch.

She was prisoner to her pile of possessions. Beverly was as bound to her pile of things, just as surely as she would have been had she been locked behind bars.

That's what it's like for all of us in so many ways, prisoners to our possessions, as someone has said, that we live in the "prison of want."

I'm reminded of those lines from the song "Fix You" by the contemporary group Coldplay: "When you try your best, but you don't succeed, When you get what you want, but not what you need..."

When you get what you want, but not what you need... That's the worry and warning underlying our story in Deuteronomy.

God had given the Israelites a place to live in freedom with the opportunity to enjoy the rich blessings of the land. The people were moving into their new land, a land of milk and honey, a land full of all they need.

But there is a worry that in getting all they need from the hand of God, they are going to want more than enough and forget the God who gives all they need.

And rather than being content in the land of milk and honey given by God, they will find themselves living in the prison of want.

Maybe we have a hard time with contentment because we're so caught up in the content... that we're possessed with possessing and we have a hard time letting go, even giving to God!

We convince ourselves we will be more generous when we have more, but statistics show that as we have more, we give away a decreasing percentage of what is ours.

According to the book, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give More Money*, at least one in of five American Christians gives nothing to their church or other charities.

The remaining 80% of us, the book says, give on average about 3% of our pre-tax income as annual donations to all religious and charitable causes. And my experience says that 3% is on the high side.

Needless to say, most churches are stressed financially.

I've had people confess to anger and envy, adultery and even gluttony, but I have never had someone come to my office, and say, "Bruce, I want more, I confess I'm greedy!"

Yes, we Americans love our things. We earn as much as we can, buy as much as we can, and hold on to it as long as we can, even when we don't need it. I read that the amount of space occupied by self-storage containers in America is the equivalent of more than three times the size of Manhattan Island!

The piling up of more and more things does not make us human. Living in the prison of want makes us less human, consumes our humanity.

The result of all this is that our neighbors also become less human. Our neighbor is no longer a person to be loved and valued as another human being; instead they are obstacles, a barrier to our wanting and getting more and more stuff,

which all leads to dehumanizing others by place or race or culture, erupting in hostility and hatred and anger and war.

What if there is not enough to go around? Suppose the needs of others keep me from getting what I want?

Emil Brunner, in his book, "Sowing and Reaping," suggested that fear and greed are synonymous.

"Fear tells us that things might take a turn for the worse," he explained. "I am sure of what I possess, but I am not so sure of what I shall receive upon letting go of what I have."

The financial industry preys on this fear all the time: You won't have enough to retire, to send children to college and so on.

Or fear may express itself as the anxiety of missing out on what everyone else has. We feel we deserve what others have, so we must spend on ourselves.

Of course, the most disastrous result of living in the prison of want is what the Bible calls idolatry.

Our story in Deuteronomy says that God is the source of all life. God makes it possible for us to live and to live meaningfully. Consequently, God alone is worthy of worship.

Remember the first few commandments are all about idolatry, about God being God, "I am the Lord your God..."

But greed moves something else into God's place. Our stuff becomes the source of life; it's who we are. We walk around as branded billboards of consumerism.

I remember seeing one of those reality shows about 'hoarding', people who simply cannot throw anything away.

As one lady told the counselor as he held a little rag doll she had picked up at a garage sale, "If you throw that away, I think you're saying you don't like me."

In the anxious quest for more and more stuff, we become like the commodities we consume. We know there's something wrong about it, but we just can't help it.

So how can we break out of this prison of want? That is the power of contentment that Paul writes about. That is the freedom Paul knows in Christ.

After the disastrous wildfires that burned many of the homes in the dry valleys and hillsides in California, a man who had lost his home to the fire was asked how he felt after losing all he had in the fire, he said, "I'm a free man now."

Is that what it takes to find contentment: to lose everything? Well, on one hand, yes, as Jesus tells us, "you must lose your life to find it...", but on the other hand, it is the freedom we have in life with Jesus.

That, I believe, is the power of the "fragrant offering" that Paul writes about, the offering of the first fruits to remind us of our relationship to God and to one another.

There is Paul in prison. There had been times, he said, when he had a lot of money, a lot of freedom. But he was content today.

It is the paradox that Paul's independence from stuff was based upon his dependence on Christ. Yes, he was in prison, but not the prison of want.

He writes, *"I can do all things through the one who strengthens me, who continually supplies me with peace and contentment and power to meet whatever comes my way."*

Instead of "the one", some of the later scribes wrote "Christ" in the text. It's not in the original. But they wanted to make sure you knew what Paul meant: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

A man who had just said goodbye to his wife at the security line at the airport overheard a father and a daughter in their last moments together.

Standing near the security gate, they hugged, and he said, "I love you. I wish you enough." She in turn said, "Daddy, our life together has been more than enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Daddy." They kissed, and she left.

The father watched her go through security, and the man said he could see the father was holding back from crying. But then the father turned to the man and with a tear in his eye asked, "Did you ever say goodbye to someone knowing it would be forever?"

Trying to be sensitive, the man asked, "But why is this a forever goodbye?"

"I am old, and she lives much too far away. I have challenges ahead, and the reality is, the next trip back will be for my funeral," the father said.

“When you were saying goodbye I heard you say, ‘I wish you enough.’ May I ask what that means?”

The father began to smile, “That’s a wish that has been handed down from generation to generation in my family. My parents used to say it to everyone.”

“When we said, ‘I wish you enough,’ we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them.”

The father looked the man in the eye and yet looked beyond to where his daughter had gone:

*I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude
bright.*

*I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun
more.*

*I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit
alive.*

*I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys
in life appear much bigger.*

I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.

*I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you
possess.*

*I wish you enough “hello’s” to get you through
the final “goodbye.”*

Paul said in all circumstances he had found enough.

That’s Paul’s freedom in Christ.

I wish you enough.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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