

# Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



## **Philippians 4:10-23** **“Gratitude In Both Directions”**

October 9, 2016  
(21<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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## **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-20, 21-23  
"GRATITUDE IN BOTH DIRECTIONS"//1:3-11

**B) vv.10-20 SUPPORT AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE COMMON MISSION.** Thanks For Gift At Last

Deals With Doctrinal/Hortatory Concerns Before Gifts

**1) v.10 Affirmation Of A Gift To Paul: Evidence Of Friendship.** *Phroneo* = Concern, 1:7, 2:2, 5, 3:15

10 So I REJOICED **IN THE LORD** greatly 1:4, 25, 2:2, 17-18, 3:1, 4:1, 4:4  
that now at length you have *revived* your concern for me; Spring After Winter = Perennials Blossom Again  
you were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Formal Thank You Postponed Till End  
Gift Alluded To In 1:3, 5 (beginning); 2:25-30 (middle)

**2) vv.11-12 Qualification- Not That: Contentment At The Extremes: Learned.**

No Solicitation, School Of Hard Knocks, Mature Self-Knowledge

11 a NOT THAT I complain of want; No Hint For Money, Mk. 12:24, 2 Cor. 1:24, *Lack*, 2:30  
12 b for *I have learned*, in whatever state I am, to be content.<sup>1</sup> *autarkes* = Self-sufficient (Stoic Virtue)  
c I know how to be abased (humbled), *Oida* = Know by experience, 2:8  
c' and I know how to abound (overflow); Paul Is Radically Dependent On God  
b' in any and *all* circumstances *I have learned* the secret of facing plenty and hunger, Life As A Class  
a' abundance and want. *Learn Secret* = Mystery Cult Term = *Initiated*  
This Same School Is Open To All Of Us!

**3) v.13 Paul's Acknowledges His Source Of Strength: Jesus Christ.**

Not Self-Sufficient Stoicism But Christ-Sufficient Faith

13 I can do *all* (these) things **IN HIM** who strengthens (empowers) me. Reminds Language  
One Of Most Misread Verses In Scripture

**1') vv.14-20 Affirmation Of A Gift To Paul: Evidence Of Friendship.** Missions Church

vv.15-17 Dense With *Friendship* Conventions

14 Yet it was kind of you to *share* my trouble (*thlipsis*/ affliction). //1:3-8 Thanksgiving, 2 Thess. 1:6, Mk. 13:19  
15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, Acts 16:9-12  
16 no church entered into *partnership*\* with me in giving and receiving except you only; Praise Gift, 1:3, 5; 2:25-30  
for even in Thessalonica you sent me help once and again. Habit, Gift Secondary To Relationship  
2 Cor. 11:7-11, 8:2, Not Fair-Weather Friends

**2') vv.17-18 Qualification- Not That: Three-Way Blessing.**

\* = Commercial Terms

Image For Gift = Fruit/Full Payment/ Fragrant Offering/ Sacrifice

17 a NOT THAT I seek the gift\*; Unlike Traveling Philosophers, Need Of Giver To Give, Good For Them!  
18 b but I seek the fruit\* which increases to your credit\*. Commercial Language, True Friendship  
c I have received full payment\*, and more; Roman Para-legal Partnership  
a' I am filled\*, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, *Paid In Full!* 2:25  
b' a fragrant offering, Gen. 8:21, Ex. 29:18, Ezek. 20:14, Generous Spirit Pleases God, 2 Cor. 9:7  
c' a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 2:17, Liturgical/Sacrificial Imagery, Potent

**3') vv.19-20 Paul Acknowledges Their Source Of Strength + Doxology.**

God's Response To Their Gift = Complete Paul's Reciprocity!

19 And my God will supply every need of yours In The Mission Of Christ  
according to his riches in glory **IN CHRIST JESUS**. When You See Glory, You Give Glory!  
If God Does Not Supply It, I Don't Need It!  
20 To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. *Amen*. Climax Of Work Is Praise, *So-Be-It!*  
= *Unto The Ages Of Ages* = God's Kingdom

**I') vv.21-23 LETTER CLOSING: DOXOLOGY, GREETINGS, BLESSING.** //1:1-2

Typical Farewell = Farewell + Luck Wishes

**A. vv.21-22 Three Greetings That Bind The Saints Together Across Space And Status.**

21 1 Greet every saint **IN CHRIST JESUS**. Unity//1:1, Relationships Matter, 2 Cor. 3:13, Not A Moral Designation  
2 The brethren who are with me *greet* you. Access To Paul In Jail: Timothy, Epaphroditus 1:1, 2:19-30  
22 3 All the saints *greet* you, especially those of Caesar's household! *Oikos* = Extended Staff/Clients //1:12-26, esp. v.13  
Some Of His Captors Were Also *Brethren*

**B. v.23 Concluding Christological Blessing.**

1 Cor. 16:23, Gal. 6:18, 1 Thess. 5:28, 2 Thess 3:18, Phlm. 25

23 The grace (*charis*) of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Origin In Christ, Doxology (v.20), Blessing (v.23)

<sup>1</sup> When asked who was wealthiest, Socrates replied "the one who is content with least, for contentment is nature's well." Seneca writes, "the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is..."

## GRATITUDE IN BOTH DIRECTIONS

*“I can do all (these) things in whom who empowers me.”*

Christ Jesus gives strength to thrive in good times and in hard.

### PHILIPPIANS 4:13

**O**ne day young Francis was riding far from Assisi and passed a leprosarium. In thirteenth century Italy— as in biblical times— lepers were a rejected lot, and Francis was not yet the saint of myth and history. He was a conflicted young man caught between the lure of wealth in his father’s cloth business, dreams of glory in perchance becoming a knight, and a life of discipleship as a Jesus follower. And as he rode, he was absorbed in thought. We pick up the story as told by historian Arnaldo Fortini:

“Suddenly the horse lurched to the side of the road. With difficulty Francis pulled him back by a violent jerk at the reins. The young man looked up and recoiled in horror. A leper stood in the middle of the road, unmoving and looking at him. He was no different from others: the usual wan specter with stained face, shaved head, dressed in gray sackcloth. He did not speak and showed no sign of getting out of the way. He looked at the horseman fixedly, strangely, with an acute and penetrating gaze.

An instant that seemed eternity passed. Francis dismounted slowly, went and took his hand, a poor emaciated hand, bloodstained, twisted, inert, and cold like that of a corpse. He put a mite of charity in it, pressed it, carried it to his lips. As he kissed the lacerated flesh of the most hated and scorned, he was flooded with a wave of emotion that shut out everything around him, one he would remember even on his death bed.

It was a step in a conversion which took many months. Francis was learning that to follow Christ may require things that

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naturally repulse us. What he didn't know then was that something greater was prompting him, allowing him to do what- humanly speaking- he was incapable of doing.”<sup>2</sup>

There are many things we're quite capable of on our own without explicit reference to God. We've each been given a body with energy and capacities. It's our realm of influence- our little kingdom,<sup>3</sup> and until it grinds to a stop we're active in all sorts of enterprises. This is the divine empowerment that comes with being made in God's image; we are agents whose actions have effects. But when, to that common capacity, are added the energies of love we refer to as *the grace of Jesus Christ*- which is nothing other than the continuing force of his living personality, we have opportunity to live a new way. We do what we could not because there is one in whose field of power we now dwell, who not only effects us from outside by example but indwells who we are by his alter-ego: the Holy Spirit.

This is what Francis experienced in his encounter with the leper. When he risked cooperating with a love that went against his inclinations, Francis tasted the joys of the kingdom of God and was soon to become one of its chief spokesman in the renewal of the church in his day. The Catholic order that sprang from his calling- The Franciscans- remains as the lengthened shadow of his remarkable life. This is the same realm of grace and power in which Paul lived; that we are drawing inspiration from a prison letter he wrote two thousand years ago is testimony to the same. Francis left us the Franciscans; Paul left us half the New Testament and churches all over Asia and Greece.

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**vv.10-13 The Apostle Paul: The Stoic And The Christian.**

Philippians was written from a Roman jail, and our best guess is in Ephesus just

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<sup>2</sup> Edited from Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, translated by Helen Moak (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992), 211-212.

<sup>3</sup> An idea of Dallas Willard,

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across the Aegean Sea from Greece.<sup>4</sup> This was no modern prison with basic amenities; jails were not for long incarcerations after conviction but for holding prisoners awaiting trial. No showers, kitchens or food service; no court appointed attorneys, few rights, and all under the control of jailers not known for their decency. When money came, in this case from Philippi through their emissary Epaphroditus, it was first for food and drink. A second purpose strikes us as unsavory, and that was bribing guards to allow in visitors.<sup>5</sup> It's the way it was, and the way it remains in much of the world today.

On my first visit to Kazakhstan in 1993 we had to bribe baggage officials at the Moscow internal airport to put our luggage and missions supplies on Aeroflot. For Paul to be allowed visitors required the good will of his jailers- and nothing purchases good will like a few coins to help out with the family. Paul was not out to escape, and with a bit of imagination we can picture him befriending guards, winning their trust, and being afforded considerable freedom in communication, one of which is the letter before us. Some guard obviously allowed Paul to hire a scribe and dictate that is now Philippians.

It had been a lean time for Paul. Like a plant during a long winter, support had withered, and so when financial help came again, Paul likened it to the blooming of spring after a long cold spell, verse 10: "So I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have *revived* – literally *bloomed again*- in your concern for me," and lest his comment be taken as a complaint he added, "you were indeed concerned for me, *but you had no opportunity.*"

Communications were then erratic at best, and what we do not know about we are not responsible for. The rule of thumb in mission near and far is to pray always, respond to needs when you know about them, and trust that God is caring for missionaries in ways that go beyond human help. Paul was both their

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<sup>4</sup> The choice of N.T. Wright in his commentary *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Oseik (*Philippians/ Philemon* [Nashville, TN: Abington, 2000], 119), speaking of bribes says, "Early Christian sources like the *Letters of Ignatius* and the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* reveal that this was the ordinary way of dealing with jailers."

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church founder and missionary, much like Father Francis Asbury was for many of the churches in South Carolina. So to be involved in mission at home and beyond our borders is not something new but the deepest DNA of the church back to the beginning.

We are the result of mission, and we are a church in mission: in Honduras through the team we commission today, and shortly I'll be teaching pastors in Kenya. A healthy church is not just local but *glocal*, local and global, across the street and around the world.<sup>6</sup> Spreading the love of God at a distance is one way to keep the fires lit close to home. Never say *either/or*; always say *both/and*. Mission starts close to home, but if it stops there it's stunted. Ours is an ecumenical and catholic faith, meaning *world-wide*, and in a shrinking world only a church that keeps up its dialog with the riches of the global church will be prepared to embrace the future. People who read and who've traveled want to be part of a church that is bigger and broader, not parochial and limited in vision. Philippi was such a church, and so is Main Street! Philippi was exceptional. They were a congregation committed to missions at home and further down the cities of the Greek peninsula which was then the cutting edge of missions. For us Honduras and Kenya; for them Athens and Corinth.

The church at Philippi had been for years Paul's missionary lifeline, as he recalls in verse 15:

“And you... yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only; for even in Thessalonica you sent me help once and again.”

If Pragmatism, the idea that *if it works it must be true*, is the popular philosophy of America, then Stoicism, the idea that *exterior circumstances should not change the inner person*, was the dominant pop philosophy of Paul's world. Life was uncertain, and the goal of Stoicism was the cultivation of self-mastery and self-sufficiency. The true philosopher was one who reduced wants

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<sup>6</sup> A favorite phrase of Al Vom Steeg.

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and needs to such a minimum as to be truly free of outside constraints.<sup>7</sup> A generation after Paul, Epictetus said, “Contentment (the same word Paul used!) comes not so much from great wealth as from few wants.”<sup>8</sup>

There ‘s wisdom here: if you can’t control the vicissitudes of the outer world- which you cannot, then take up the battle for the inner world and control yourself. If you cannot determine what happens around you, then learn the tough disciplines that let you choose your responses to what happens around you. As Stephen Covey said years later, “Don’t be reactive; be proactive!” How trendy that sounds! In truth how ancient and Stoic.

If verses 11 and 12 were lifted from Philippians and placed before an audience who did not know Paul was the author, and if they were asked what philosophy it represented, they would all have said *Stoicism*. It is a gem of composition and shows that Paul was fully conversant with the intellectual climate of his day. At the center is knowledge based on experience, “*I know* how to be humbled (or empty), and *I know* how to overflow.” This is something Paul *learned*, “for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content,” meaning self-controlled.

And if that is how you think and live, you do not *complain of want*; you’re not begging for support or always dropping hints how hard life is. For the serious and aware person- the true philosopher and Christian disciple, life is a constant classroom and ongoing laboratory of character formation, and riches and need are both tests of character, as Paul said, “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want.” He was, as a later play was titled, *A Man For All Seasons*. And in this Paul differed not a whit from the Stoicism of his day, in which a measure of wisdom is found.

But there was one big difference, and in this case it makes all the difference. As long as the self is supreme and the cultivation of the self is the passion of life, then the self is still trapped in Sin, which is defined as willful

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<sup>7</sup> Oseik, *Philippians*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Philippians 4:10-23.

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independence from God.<sup>9</sup> Virtue apart from the knowledge of God is still self-centered; it's *all about me*, about being my best and fulfilling my potential and being all I can be and being an Army of one, all as modern sounding as the latest self-help book or the latest commercial.

But if life is designed not to be centered in the self but God-centered, and if the one God of the Jews is best displayed in the man Jesus as illumined by the Holy Spirit, then the sovereign self cannot be the organizing center of life. The Stoics had the diagnosis right: life is an uncertain mixture of highs and lows, pleasure and pain, and you have to find a way to deal with it. They even had part of the response right: focus on inward disciplines. Their error and dead end was to leave the self cooped up with itself, when what we most need is a healed relationship with a God who holds us open to all of life.

Paul may have sounded at times like a Stoic, but the secret of his life and energy and joy and love and endurance and hope and passion and wisdom was that his self had found a new center in Jesus, and of that new relationship he gives witness in verse 13, "I have power to do all these things *in him who empowers me.*" Let pain and pleasure come; let want and plenty pass by; with Christ at the center all are welcomed to do their work of increasing the dependence of the self on Jesus and on the Father and the Spirit. What the Stoics aimed at, Paul found, not self-sufficiency but Christ-sufficiency.

When you spoke with a Stoic, you debated a man and his philosophy of the autonomous, self-sufficient man; when you listened to Paul you dealt with the man and the mysterious Triune God who surrounded and indwelt him. What powered Paul was the risen Jesus who kept welling up within him- in good times and bad. His internal dynamo had an external power supply!

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<sup>9</sup> David Kinnaman has written, "If we peel back the layers, many Christians are using the Way of Jesus as a means of pursuing the Way of Self. Our discipleship efforts must prophetically respond to the 'iSpirit' of the age; people must not only convert to become a disciple of Jesus, but also de-convert from the religion of the Self" (*The State of Discipleship: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with the Navigators, 2015*, [resources.barna.org/products/state-of-discipleship](http://resources.barna.org/products/state-of-discipleship)).

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At its best, living Christian faith completes and brings to fulfillment all that is good and true in the world's philosophical and psychological search. So don't make fun of someone who's addicted to self-help books and the latest guru seminars or who's searching around for a coherent philosophy of life; it can be an initial signal the Holy Spirit is at work stirring the person to break free from the trivial obsessions of the culture for something deeper. The hunger and the quest is genuine, but it will only find fulfillment in Jesus Christ and his coming to displace, indwell and fill all the capacities of the self with his love and wisdom. Ours is a culture of *the over-inflated-self*. Just before his death, Dr. Robert Webber gave his diagnosis:

“We live in a culture of disbelief regarding our Christian heritage. However, when it comes to our personal well-being and future, we live in the culture of *belief in the self*. There is almost nothing the self cannot do. So, the popular guru Dr. Phil— without denying that he has some helpful insights— titled his best-selling book *Self Matters*. His main point is that we must create our own life through the rediscovery of the inner self. If so, then our life in this world must be self-generated. There are (thus) no objective, common guidelines for the fulfilled life.”<sup>10</sup>

This is the reason for our insane consumerism. Patricia Dalton says that what was once confined to the holidays has become a year-round affliction. Unhappy people trying to fill the emptiness of life by spending, then consulting psychologists like her to figure out what's gone wrong in their lives. She writes:

"Those of us who lived through the '60s... forgotten the warning that everything you buy owns you. To pay for all their junk, people now work so hard that they're ruining their marriages, their families, and their health. No wonder many of us feel 'spiritually empty' as the year winds down.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Who Gets To Narrate The World?* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2008), 17.

<sup>11</sup> "Christmas: The Growing Backlash Against Greed," *The Week* (12-10-04).

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**Philippians 4:10-20, 21-23..... 10**

The self is created in the image and likeness of God and finds contentment and resilience only there. St. Augustine said it best, “Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.” Our hymns are full of answers to the never-satisfied yearnings of the insatiable self, “All to Jesus I surrender...”<sup>12</sup> Sin is much more than misdeeds; it’s a pervasive, deceptive power that keeps us forever looking to the self to fulfill the self instead of looking to God. So if it keeps self at the center, it’s a symptom of the disease, not the cure. And if worship becomes primarily entertainment– as it has in some circles, then God has been displaced by the desire for more adrenalin and better distractions. And in this regard verse 13 may be the most misread and misused verse in current Christian culture, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” It’s not about Jesus giving us power to fulfill the self as culturally defined with fame and fortune and beauty and impressive achievements. No, that’s using Jesus for an alien agenda, and Christian pop-culture is full of it.

What Paul had in mind was the exact opposite; not Paul using Jesus to fulfill his dream of the good life, but Jesus using Paul for a large kingdom purpose that sometimes involved real suffering. Don Kistler nailed it, "The person with the discontented heart has the attitude that everything he does for God is too much, and everything God does for him is too little."<sup>13</sup> And the difficulty for all of us- even serious followers of Christ, is that we are all swimming in the same toxic, polluted waters as everyone else, and unless we find ways to resist the incessant appeal to center life in the self and its incessant demands, the tides of culture sweep us all way.

Paul was content for the risen Jesus to be his lot in life, which is an amazing confession, one that still out-reaches me. He was grateful when monetary gifts came; they were a sign of love and an indicator the church at Philippi was exercising the gift of generosity; it was good for Paul and good for them and good for the mission. So beware of a faith that is primarily about the service and enhancement of the self; embrace a faith that re-centers the self in Christ and offers a sustaining relationship with him for whatever comes.

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<sup>12</sup> *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 354.

<sup>13</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Philippians 4:10-23.

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**Philippians 4:10-20, 21-23..... 11**

A frazzled spiritual seeker once interrupted his busy life to spend a few days in a monastery. "I hope your stay is a blessed one," said the monk as he showed the visitor to his cell. "If you need anything, let us know, and we'll teach you how to live without it."<sup>14</sup>

**vv.14-20 A Celebration Of Partnership In Mission.**

In 1975 just before Thanksgiving, radio commentator Paul Harvey told the true story of a woman and her long-frozen turkey:

“The Butterball Turkey Company set up a telephone hotline to answer questions about preparing holiday turkeys. One woman called to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in the bottom of her freezer for 23 years. The representative told her the turkey would probably be safe if the freezer had been kept below zero the entire 23 years. She was warned that even if the turkey was safe to eat, the flavor would probably have deteriorate to such a degree that she would not recommend eating it.

The caller replied, ‘That's what I thought. We'll give the turkey to our church.’

“And now,” as Paul Harvey said with delight and exquisite timing, “you know the rest of the story.”<sup>15</sup>

The church at Philippi didn't give leftovers, the freezer-burned, what no longer had any use to them. First Methodist Philippi had a record of support which Paul reviews in verses 14 through 16. It is impressive:

“Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving but you only; for even in Thessalonica you sent me

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<sup>14</sup> Philip Yancey, "What 147 Elk Taught Me About Prayer," *Christianity Today* (March 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Harvey daily radio broadcast (11-22-95).

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help once and again.”

About twenty cents of every dollar given here goes beyond local operations to missions outside the church. God’s been good to us; we’ve grown in local and foreign missions, in impact in the city, and we have brought all our facilities back up to shape. Churches don’t have money problems; churches have prayer and leadership and vision and mission problems.

Now there is no doubt their gift made Paul’s life easier. He ate better and more often. Received needed medical care if required and had resources to help out locally. Money is like manure: pile it up and it stinks, spread it around and it helps things grow. But even here Paul thought beyond his own immediate needs. The earlier qualification, “Not that I complain of want” is matched by a second in verse 17, “Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit which increases to your credit.” Giving was good for them. We don’t purchase God’s grace, but giving is an investment, which is why Jesus spoke of *laying up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupts, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*<sup>16</sup> Even greater than Paul’s need to receive was their need to give and what it did for them.

Each month Lori and I have a great privilege, and that is to write our tithe checks. That’s ten percent in the offering plate, and I invite you to follow my example.” We can’t afford to have anyone coast. When it comes to service and giving, it’s all hands on deck! Giving is an act of self-offering to God and thus an act of worship, as Paul said of the Philippian’s help, “a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”

It is finally not our money but ourselves that we put in the plates. One thing Paul was sure of, that such a people would not go lacking, and that the God we serve has multiple ways to sustain us in our obedience, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” It is in the mission of following Jesus and serving others that we have confidence of God’s provision. And having spoken of the glory, all he could do was praise it, “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 6:19.

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**Philippians 4:10-20, 21-23..... 13**

I'm not sure just what to call them. The best I've come up with thus far is *drive-by conversations*. I've had so many recently I've had to come up with a name and a theory as to why they're increasing in my slice of the world. My theory is that pain is on the rise and that— especially with young adults from dysfunctional families- anyone who pays attention is liable to receive the kind of self-disclosure that used to be reserved for confidential settings.

A week ago I stopped for gas off my beaten path. Since the plexiglass little screen on the pump was so clouded and the late afternoon sun at maximum reflection, I couldn't see what I was doing and so went inside for help. And there she sat. Early 20's, hair with streaks of— I think it was blue, clothes a little tight, bad nutrition, tattoos and tongue ring, all the emblems of her generation's rebellion, the new cool which rejects the old cool, and from just a glance I guessed life was hard. I was the only one in the store at the time; she had her ear buds in and talked into the air on a cell phone. She was sniffing, a tear on her cheek. I overheard her say, "I feel so sad and so mad," so my radar was up.

She stood and came to the register, wiping her eyes. "Can I help you?"

I had my collar on, so I was safe from being misunderstood when I replied, "I couldn't help but overhear. Have you had a loss?"

She then scrambled my categories, "Yes, I just lost my gay boyfriend."

The human mind works quickly to right itself, and I went through several nano-second scenarios before coming up with a brilliant reply, "Oh?"

"Yes," she added— flashing anger, "he left me for my brother."

I said what came to mind, "Life's complicated, isn't it?"

She deflated. By that I mean she stood flatfooted, her shoulders went down, and she let out a long sigh.

"Life's been hard, hasn't it?"

She nodded, then told me her story in outline. Fled a town fifteen miles away looking for new life in Greenwood. No car. Small world. Busted family. Grew up Pentecostal, but as yet no church connections here. A young woman from the hard side of life, her hopes for marriage dashed by a man who cheated with her brother. Such conversations remind me how strange my assumed normalcy is, how I was raised in a different world.

I listened a bit, handed her a card, told her we have some female staff she could talk to, and to give us a ring. "I'm Pastor Phil," I said, "and I think the Lord sent me by this afternoon to encourage and remind you that you are not a

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throw-away. The Lord has good things for you.”

She smiled, “I just might do that. I need some help with my life.”

As I left, my head was swimming, my heart aching. “How many more are there like her? And in about fifteen minutes the Lord answered my question.

I’d skipped lunch for some reason, so I turned into a fast food place on my way to the hospital where I placed my order into one of those speakers built by the lowest bidder. I pulled up to pay, rolled down the window, and glanced up to see a woman in her early thirties. To say she was thin was an understatement. My first thought was *meth-addict*. Blond, stringy hair, unwashed that day, but a smile as she reviewed the order and spoke, “I hope you’ve had a great day.”

“Yep, I preached twice, taught Sunday School, did a counseling session before heading out to make some visits and turning in here to meet you.”

What she did next, there at the drive-through, was shocking. She said nothing. All she did was hold up her left arm so I could see the underside. It was a deep black and blue from just above the wrist to just above the elbow, and just above the elbow was a risen, infected sore about the size of a dime. My first thought was, Why is she working at a restaurant near food? My second was— an infected needle tract from heroin.

“Are you an IV drug user?” I asked, trying to make sense of her wordless gesture.

“No,” she said, “my boyfriend beats me all the time.”

“Have you been to Megg’s house? Have you notified the police? Do you have a pastor or family nearby?”

“No,” she said, “and I don’t know what to do.”

I looked in my rear view mirror to see another customer rolling in behind me. I paid and looked at her one last time, “You don’t have to be a punching bag. There are plenty of people in this town willing to help.”

“Thank you for listening,” she said.

The car behind me tapped on the horn, and off I drove. I thought to myself, “What just happened?”

I thought I heard a reply, but I’m not quite sure, “I’m showing you a bit of what I see?”

“Is it that bad out there?”

“Worse than you know,” came the echo of a voice.

“And what should I do?”

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“Pay attention, and let me keep opening you eyes,” was the thought. Was it him?

It was a drive-by conversation, the second in half an hour, a quick, deep slice of life from two young women with hardscrabble lives. They are everywhere, and they need encouragement. They are *the invisible people*, the ones who stand behind counters slinging burger and swiping credit cards. And if you're courteous, even kind, and if you speak a word of affirmation or interest, you may hear the most amazing stories and your heart be broken as mine was. Jesus Christ, I believe, is seeking them through us.

### CONCLUSION

This work cannot be done alone. It takes a community of encouragement to do this without giving in to discouragement. I know this because of the way Paul closed the letter, “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you,” and then a note for alert insiders, “especially those of Caesar’s household.” Here was a people called to the reach people with no place as well as the highly placed.

The very imperial system that was oppressing Paul was itself being subtly undermined around the edges of the Empire by the Christian message through an incarcerated apostle, and in less than three hundred more years would take over the Empire as its official faith. Never underestimate what you are doing here on this corner and around the world. You are a forward outpost of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, undermining the old world while preparing to welcome the new. It is your job; it is your high privilege, and it deserves your support, and beyond that your full participation.