

**“Enough is Enough”**  
**Texts: Philippians 4:10-14**  
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*“Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” Philippians 4:11*

Several months ago, *The Atlantic* featured a lead article with this bleak title: “*Did Christianity Cause the Crash?*” The image on the magazine’s cover was even more ominous, depicting a large wooden cross with a “for sale” sign hanging from its side. The author of the piece, Hanna Rosin, tells one distressing story after another describing how theologies of wealth have been an integral part of our nation’s recent economic collapse. She records her conversations with a pastor who began a nondenominational independent church in 2001, when a few friends started meeting weekly in his basement. In the decade since its founding, the church has grown steadily and now rents space from a beautiful historic Baptist church in the town that can no longer fill its pews. What is unusual (and perhaps distressing) about this founding pastor is his *second* job. As the church grew, the pastor was hired as a loan officer by two local mortgage companies, overseeing their outreach efforts to the growing Latino population that also constituted the majority of his congregation. “To many of his parishioners,” Rosin explains, “(the pastor) was not just a spiritual adviser, but a financial one as well.” The article offers a biting critique of the active and unapologetic role of theologies of prosperity in enticing members to make risky and ill-advised financial decisions. At one point, Rosin describes how one prosperity gospel preacher summed it up for his congregation: “He spoke in very specific terms during church services, promising that a \$100 offering would yield a \$10,000 return: ‘This is not my promise. It is God’s promise, and he will make it happen!’”<sup>i</sup> Quite a motivational speech for church giving; a guarantee that God will return to you ten times what you have given.

How far we have come from the days when the Apostle Paul, imprisoned for his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, penned this letter to the congregation he most loved. Philippians is Paul’s friendliest, most encouraging and hopeful epistle. It is filled with the language of joy and gratitude; the Greek roots are *chara* and *charis*, meaning grace, gift, thanksgiving, and joy. And one of the sources of Paul’s joy is the Philippians’ generous support of his missionary work. In addition to his career as evangelist and missionary to the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul was a fundraiser, relying on the generosity of the churches he founded to provide the necessary funding for his constant travel and his ongoing collection for the needy churches in Jerusalem. In this morning’s passage from Philippians, we read Paul’s thank you note to the church. It begins traditionally enough: “I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me...” but soon the tone takes a strange turn. Paul continues this note, “not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” What kind of note of appreciation is this? Thanks for the contribution, but I was fine without it?

I remember the time a senior pastor invited his elderly parish associate to preach the sermon on pledge Sunday. The idea was that the congregation might be fatigued of hearing its well-paid pastor urge deeper and more generous financial support of the church. Why not have the well-respected and long-tenured former seminary professor offer that message to the congregation? Well, the pastor knew his plan had backfired the moment his colleague stepped into the pulpit and spoke the first sentence of his sermon; looking out over the congregation, he began, "God does not need your money." Then he looked back at the pastor with an ear-to-ear grin.

God does not need your money. Or, as Paul puts it, "I know what it's like to have plenty and I know what it's like to do without. Either way, I'll be just fine." Can you imagine a stewardship campaign built around this kind of counterintuitive and foolish strategy? Tom Daniel, the chair of our Commitment Ministry Team should *not* be taking notes on Paul's strategy. What is Paul thinking?

We get a better picture of his thought process when we come to verse thirteen. It's a memory verse. Perhaps some of you, as children, had the experience of standing in front of a congregation full of scrutinizing adults and being asked to recite scripture from memory. I specifically, and with some indignation, remember the summer when our ticket to the pool party was dependent on our memorization of Psalm 23. Long hours were spent making sure we children had all the words right, because so much was at stake! Philippians 4:13 is one of those memory verses. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." It is a powerful word of hope and faith.

And in the context of this letter, it provides a *theologically* rich basis for generous stewardship. As in other places in his letters, Paul here grounds his appeal for the Philippians to give not in the effects of their gifts but in their cause, gratitude for the faithfulness of God in Jesus Christ. It makes all the difference in the world. You may know that one of the key points of divisions among Reformation-era Christians was a disagreement over the motivation for good works. We Presbyterians have always held that all that is good comes from God, including our desire to do good. Thus, we give financially to the church, we spend a Saturday at a Habitat for Humanity build, we volunteer to help with Mission Camp, we bake a casserole for a neighbor in need, we serve on a church committee, we participate in God's ministry in the world. Presbyterians are known for this kind of active mission work. But we are equally known for the theological motivation behind these actions: not to earn God's favor or blessing, but as a grateful response to the favor and blessings we have already received. Not to convince God to be loving or gracious but because we have experienced the love and grace of God.

Thus, Paul's theology of stewardship is grounded not in reward/punishment ideology but in the truth of his own experience, that God has provided all that we need and God's blessings evoke our gratitude.

If Christian theology contributed to the economic crash, as Hanna Rosin suggests, then some of the blame surely rests on the financial opportunism thinly veiled as gospel

preaching that is the subject of her piece. But there is more to it than that. There is the ideology of excess that characterizes our culture, and in which the church has participated. We have participated to the extent that we have joined societal demands for more and bigger and better of everything. We have participated to the extent that we have ignored neighbors in need and strangers without the basic necessities of life. We have participated to the extent that we have disregarded the truth of our faith, that what we have comes to us as a gift from God to be enjoyed and used in service to others. We participate when we abandon our passion for God and replace it with a passion for more.

Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, once asked an audience of seminarians, whether it was possible to own a house that was sinfully large. The crowd yelled back "Yes!" "When is it sinfully too large?" There was silence, until one honest soul was heard to answer, "When it's bigger than mine."

When will we muster the courage to proclaim that enough is enough?

Not long ago, I heard a preacher who addressed stewardship in a way that has reframed my perspective of the term. Stewardship is the traditional way that Christian churches talk about how we use our resources without using words like money. But this preacher was speaking to a church full of young professionals who have almost no familiarity with this traditional church term. He was preaching to a congregation full of people who had never filled out a church pledge card, though they were generous and prosperous folks. He needed a new way to speak of why it is important to give to the church without using tired and overly churchy language. What he did was to point to the two places where our priorities are most obvious. He invited all of us to go home and take out our calendars and our checkbooks (for many of us that meant our i-calendars and Online Banking statements) and see what kinds of patterns and themes emerge. Where are we spending our time and our money? Do the decisions reflected on those impartial reports align with our deepest beliefs and hopes? I was frankly amazed by how much my calendar and checkbook said to me about where and how I use precious resources. I suggest taking a deep breath and trying it for yourselves.

As part of the final chapel worship service each year at Columbia Theological Seminary, each graduating senior is invited to stand and share a particular verse of scripture that summarizes their experience of the seminary. Many of the old favorites reappear each year, including Philippians 4:13, which provides a voice of confidence and celebration at the end of a long journey. The year I graduated, we shared our verses in Biblical order, and just after someone stood and boldly proclaimed "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," another student stood to recite Philippians 4:14, a summary of her seminary journey: "In any case, it was kind of you to share in my distress." There was a moment of laughter, then a wave of realization. For this student, it was the essence of a faith community. Sharing sorrow **and** support. Being the body of Christ for one another. Not the most memorable verse of this very popular letter, and yet perhaps the most compelling faith statement of all. Paul gives thanks to the Philippians for recognizing that enough is enough, for giving out of a sense of joy and gratitude and for meeting the needs of others out of the abundance that they have received. The motivation for

generous giving is **not** the insincere and pedantic promise that your tithe will be returned to you tenfold. We give because we have been blessed with enough, and we are grateful.

Generosity, modeled after the gracious and unending love of God, is a hallmark of the Christian faith.

One of my favorite pieces on the generosity of God was written by a Reformed theologian named Lewis Smedes, just months before he died at the age of eighty-one. The title of the essay is “God and A Grateful Old Man.” Smedes describes the lessons that he has learned about receiving gifts, including the fact that real gifts always come with a person attached. He writes, “we teach our children to say thank-you to their grandmother for her birthday gift; why should we not teach them to say thank you to God for the gift of their birth? Why should we not teach them that every new dawn of every morning, every drop of rain, every budding tulip, every blade of grass, every lovely thought we think, every wonderful feeling we feel, every memory of pleasure past, every tingle of pleasure present, every touch of a loved one, every hug from a laughing child, every note of a Mozart concerto, every coming home to our own place and people, every new hope that sees beyond a hard present—all of them are gifts with a person attached.”

Listen to how he closes the essay: “I remember magnificent things and I remember little things, and I feel grateful for them both. I remember that Jesus died to do whatever needed doing to let the river of God’s love sweep me to himself, and I also remember the Velcro that makes it easy to put on my sandals. I remember my mother’s weary weeping after a long day’s labor and I remember the pleasure my wife and I had with our first garage door opener. Big things, little things, it matters little as long as they were gifts with a person attached.”<sup>ii</sup>

Enough grace. Enough love. Enough, and more than enough, of everything we most need. When you view life through that lens, it’s easy to let go of anxiety about the future; it’s easy to be grateful; it’s easy to give with a generous and grateful heart. It’s easy to rejoice, and rejoice again!

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<sup>i</sup> Hanna Rosin, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” *The Atlantic*, December 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, “God and a Grateful Old Man” in John Wilson, ed. *The Best Christian Writing 2004*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 147-149.