2022 Thanksgiving Sunday

**THE SECRET OF HAPPINESS**

*(Subtitle: A Happy Mindset)*

Philippians 4:1-13

Key Verse: 4:12

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

People struggle hard in pursuit of happiness. But not everyone feels happy. For example, a highly achieved man with wealth, knowledge, and a carrier may feel confused about why he is not so happy, while an ordinary old lady who does not have much still feels satisfied. (Pic#1) Why is it so? Well, happiness is a subjective matter. It’s a matter of perspective, which comes from within. Marcus Aurelius, a Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher (161-180 AD) said, *“The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts”* Some people may not agree with this statement. Still, we cannot deny the grain of truth in it. Marcus was not the only one who said that our happiness depends on the state of our mind. Many great thinkers and teachers spoke of the importance of the attitude of our thoughts. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount addresses profoundly that our happiness depends on the attitude of our minds and hearts, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven…” (Mt. 5:3-12)

Apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome when he wrote the letter to Philippian Christians. Humanly speaking, after working very hard as a pioneering missionary, being put in jail isn’t a pleasant experience, particularly in the last stage of his life. He could have felt miserable in such circumstances. Yet, his letter was not gloomy or bitter but was full of joy, hope, and thanksgiving. How could he be so unreal? Was he out of his mind? No. He had the secret of happiness. What is it? Of course, we can say that the secret of his joy was his faith in Christ Jesus. Yet, his faith would be superficial and ineffective without a healthy mindset. This morning, let us think about the secret of happiness, which comes from a healthy perspective.

***First, we should have a humble mindset***. (1-3) Look at verses 1-3. “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! I plead with Euodia, and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.” It seems that Euodia and Syntyche were devoted women of God who supported Paul’s ministry from the early stage of pioneering. Yet, we are not sure what caused the conflict between these two women. They might have different personalities and couldn’t agree with one another. Perhaps one lady was pro-Republicans while the other was pro-Democrats. However, other church members felt conflicted because of their conflict, not knowing whose side they should stand on.

What was Paul’s suggestion to resolve the conflict in the church? It was having the same mind in the Lord. What did he mean by “having the same mind in the Lord”? Well, he explained it quite extensively earlier in chapter 2. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” (3-7) Having the same mind in the Lord means having a humble attitude toward one another, just as Christ Jesus humbled himself. When we are self-righteous and proud, we are not happy and prone to have many conflicts. Happiness belongs to those who have a humble mindset.

***Second, we should have a positive mindset. (4-7***) Read verse 4. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” In Paul’s letter to Philippian Christians, the word “joy” or “rejoice” is repeated 14 times. The phrase “Rejoice in the Lord” is something Paul had mentioned earlier in 3:1, which states, “Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.” (NLT) By saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul was not urging people to be unrealistic. He was not saying that we should never feel sad. He was saying that Christians should not develop cognitive distortion. Instead, they should maintain an optimistic view of life. Once we develop cognitive distortion, we tend to see things negatively, leading to sadness, anxiety, and even depression.

A positive mindset considers things, including sufferings, hardships, and even failures, as God’s way of fulfilling his ultimate purpose for our good. It’s a spiritual perspective based on faith that in all things, God works for the good of his beloved children (Ro. 8:28). It requires an intentional discipline of our mindsets, which is hard.

Apostle Paul was aware of the anxieties and fears that Philippian Christians had to deal with in daily living. So, he gave them troubleshooting tips in the following verses. Look at verses 6-7. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” In these verses, Paul encourages them first to be aware of their anxiousness and come to God through prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving so that their fear and anxiety can be replaced with the peace and joy of heaven. Paul’s primary concern, however, is that we always have an optimistic and positive mindset based on God’s absolute love and providence.

When Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, they were stripped and beaten with rods. But what did they do? They didn’t fall into despair. Acts 16:25 states, “About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” While they were singing hymns and praying, there was such a violent earthquake that all the prison doors flung open. Soon they were released. (Act 16) Paul’s example was an extreme case. But the point is that having no anxiety is important in our troubled life. We need joy, a positive spirit, and energy that comes from God through our positive mindset. That’s what “Rejoice in the Lord always” means.

***Third, we should train ourselves to maintain a healthy mindset. (8-9)*** Look at verses 8 and 9. “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy- think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” In these verses, Paul explains what we should spend time thinking about. In other words, it’s not just how we think but what we think that is important. We should struggle to think about what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy.

If we want to have a healthy body, what do we do? We eat healthy food and exercise regularly. Our body needs good nutrition and proper training. Likewise, our mind also requires good food and training to maintain mental health.

We live in a high-tech generation. Everybody has access to high-tech social media. Almost unlimited access to educational programs and entertainment is available at our fingertips. We surely don’t want to fall behind by not using high-tech. However, the downside is that playing too many video games and connecting to entertaining social media without self-control may be harmful. We must be cautious and wise in utilizing tech knowledge.

When Paul talked about feeding our minds with good things, the Scripture was number one because it provides knowledge and wisdom to discern between good and evil, healthy and unhealthy, and right and wrong. The word of God also nourishes our soul whenever we meditate on it. A Psalmist states, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore, I hate every wrong path.” (Ps. 119:103-104) I also believe that a good education, including reading good books, is essential for nourishing, developing, and training our minds. We will be newly energized and grow to be wholesome people.

***Fourth, we should learn to be content. (10-13)*** In verses 10-13, before ending his letter, Paul shares his personal experiences and shows his deep appreciation for those who supported him. Since Paul pioneered the church in Philippi at the beginning of his second missionary journey, the Philippian brothers and sisters participated in Paul’s ministry. However, they had lost contact with each other for a while, perhaps due to Paul’s imprisonment or misunderstanding. While he was in prison, he needed support from them more than ever. But there was no support from them for at least one or two years. Paul could have felt neglected and abandoned by his friends and coworkers.

Look at verses 10-11. “I rejoice greatly in the Lord at least you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” The Philippians brothers and sisters finally sent their support through Epaphroditus (2:25). Paul rejoiced greatly in the Lord for their renewed support for him. Yet, he also shared the secret of his happiness in these verses. In other words, while he was neglected and in need, he didn’t feel neglected. How could he not? It’s because he learned how to be content in all circumstances. In other words, he could still rejoice in the Lord even when he was left alone in prison without any support. Wow! That’s remarkable.

We feel sad when we are in need. We easily fall into self-pity when we feel neglected by our friends, coworkers, and loved ones. Some people become bitter toward them as if they were entitled to their support. *“I have worked hard to support you with all my heart and strength. But you are neglecting me when I need your support.”*  It’s hard not to fall into self-pity, not to mention rejoice in the Lord. But the truth is we can rejoice. How? Happiness is a matter of perspective. The ability to be content in all circumstances is a secret of happiness we need to develop.

Look at verses 12. “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” It seems that Paul knew how to adjust to any circumstance and find something to be thankful for and satisfied with. He used the word “the secret” of being content. Why is it a secret? Because it’s heavenly wisdom that most people don’t obtain automatically. This kind should be discovered and obtained through personal experiences. However, Paul said that he could do all this through Christ Jesus, who enabled him in verse 13, “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

Let me close my sermon. Looking back at our lives in retrospect for the last three years, we have been challenged in many ways, including the Pandemic. But God has blessed us in many ways and so abundantly. God sustained our lives with his provision and protection. He gave us air to breathe, water to drink, clothes to wear, food to eat, and a place to stay and rest. He gave us grace through his words and has provided us with so many good things that it’s almost impossible to count them all. There are so many things to be thankful for.

But it’s also easy to take things for granted. We also become grumpy, especially when we compare ourselves with others who seem to be in a more favorable situation. That’s not a healthy mindset. Our happiness does not depend on what we have, but it depends on the state of our mind. When we have a healthy attitude, we can be happy no matter what. Today, we learn a happy mindset: to be humble, cheerful, and content in all circumstances. Our inborn personality traits may not change much, but our way of thinking and perspective can be changed. Happiness is a matter of perspective. May we struggle to develop a happy mindset and remember to be humble, joyful, cheerful, optimistic, prayerful, thankful, and content in all circumstances. It’s not easy to do so. But we can be happy no matter what. We can experience God’s living presence and his kingdom. **“Happy Thanksgiving!”**