

The Most Famous Thank-You Letter in Church History

Philippians 4:15-20

Extravagant Grace, Part 6

One of the marks of our culture is an expectation that we should have everything we want – which leads us to show appreciation far less often than we should.

It also leads us to complain about far more things than are reasonable.

I came across this illustration that proves my point – unfortunately. It was a series of notes and comments received by the staff members who serve at a National Park well known for hiking trails and spectacular views.

Here are some of the reviews they've received over the years:

- The trails need to be wider so people can walk side-by-side, while holding hands
- The trails need to be paved so they can be snow-plowed in the winter
- The places where trails do not exist are not well marked
- Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
- Chair lifts need to be in some places along the trail so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them
- Escalators should be installed at areas that are steep
- When the trail ends, a restaurant would be nice
- The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please remove these annoying animals
- A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get

reimbursed? Please call me at this phone number

- One more: there are too many bugs and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to get rid these pests. ¹

I would be tempted to write back, “It’s called the wilderness because – it’s a wilderness”; or “We prefer spiders to people – they never complain.” Or something less diplomatic.

One of the marks of an unbelieving world, according to Romans chapter 1 is that they refuse to give God thanks for His creation – and His attributes – and, effectively, His grace through all He created for us. ***For even though they knew about God, Paul wrote, they refused to honor Him or give Him thanks (Romans 1:21).***

An unthankful spirit is a distinguishing mark of an unbeliever. Which is why we all know as believers that a spirit of gratitude should mark us as one of our distinctives. But knowing that doesn't make it easier.

I love the way one author wrote that any time you feel that you have nothing to be thankful for, remember this – planet earth is spinning on its axis, right now, at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour. At the same time, we are hurtling through space at 67,000 miles per hour.

So even on a day when you feel like you accomplished nothing, you traveled millions miles through space! Without falling off or suddenly spinning out of orbit.

When was the last time you thanked God for keeping earth in orbit, at just the right speed and just the right distance from the sun – and every 24 hours, pulling off a 360 rotation as precise as any stopwatch can measure?

So, anytime you can't think of anything else, you can always pray – “Lord, I wasn't sure we'd make the full rotation today, but You did it again . . . thank you!”ⁱⁱ

Watch someone who knows how to thank God for His extravagant grace – which is demonstrated, by the way, in a million ways we don't even observe – or will never know – watch that thankful person and you'll discover in them a readiness to thank other people around them too.

Instead of complaining for the ways people never come through – or the way things didn't work out as expected – or trails that never got snow plowed – these people will find a way to send a word of thanks and encouragement.

One author put it this way: the more mature prayers of thanksgiving are not those offered for the obvious blessings, but those spoken in gratitude for obstacles overcome, for insights gained and for help received in time of need.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is exactly where we find the Apostle Paul. He's in a place in his own life where things didn't work out as he'd expected; he's been disappointed by the apparent lack of concern from the believers in Rome where he is now under house arrest.

What can easily get lost in our exposition of the Book of Philippians is the fact that Paul is saying “thank you” – not only to God, but to other people.

In fact, this happens to be one of his motives in sending this letter – to thank this church for their prayers and financial support. Imagine, writing a thank you letter while in chains.

Sam Gordon wrote in his commentary that this letter is the most famous thank you letter in church history – and I would agree!^{iv}

So take your copy of this thank you letter – and turn to **chapter 4 and verse 15**, where we left off in our last study.

What I want to do as we work through several verses is give you 5 summary sentences that basically highlight the message of Paul's thank you letter. And the first one is this:

- 1. Thank you for being faithful partners in ministry.**

Notice verse 15, You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone.

Paul is taking them back to the very beginning of his ministry to them. When he'd first arrived in the city of Philippi, in the region called Macedonia, there were no Christians, there wasn't any church, and there had never been missionary. Paul was the first one to arrive.

By the time Paul left, following the usual riot and jail sentence, a church was meeting in the home of the first convert in that city – in fact, in all of Europe – a wealthy woman named Lydia.

The members of this infant church included a former demon possessed slave who'd come to faith. She was joined by the entire family of the Warden from the local penitentiary. He'd gotten saved after an earthquake released all the prisoners and none of them ran away, thanks to Paul and Silas.

But Paul didn't need to add any historical commentary in this thank you letter – in fact, he starts verse 15 by basically saying, you all know this already!

The generosity of the Philippian church to Paul goes back a long way.^v

And from that initial visit, this church had remained loyal and supportive of Paul, sending him gifts from time to time. And since Paul was constantly on the move, sometimes they lost track of him – as they did while he was here in Rome, for some time.

But as soon as the news reached them that Paul was under arrest – that he was destitute – that he lacked everything – that he couldn't freely work or preach – that he was even cold during the winter months – immediately the Philippians collected funds and sent Epaphroditus to find him.^{vi}

Now Paul typically supported himself on his missionary travels by taking along his tent making tools. His standard policy was to support himself. In fact, he refused to receive gifts from the Corinthian believers because it would have been misrepresented.

But now under house arrest, Paul is dependent on others – and the word that strikes you of course in verse 15 is the word **alone**.

The Philippians *alone* sent support to Paul, which meant that Paul was effectively alone.

Stop and let that sink in – at this late point in Paul’s ministry where dozens and dozens of house churches now dot the landscape – none of them – none of them – captured the vision and value of the Apostle Paul. Everyone else just sort of forgot him.

One of the reasons the Philippian church is worth remembering, is because they remembered.^{vii}

And their financial and material gifts to Paul were really their own acts of gratitude for what he’d done in their lives.

Which by the way, becomes a wonderful place to stop and challenge us all to make sure we thank those people that God has used spiritually and uniquely in our lives – that parent – that teacher – that mentor – the person who led you to Christ – perhaps that pastor who baptized you or taught you.

And I’m not saying that so you’ll send me money or write me nice notes. Krispy Kreme will be just fine. Actually, please don’t do that either.

Take time to write your own thank you note to someone who marked you in the faith.

Now I want to point out the fact that Paul doesn’t refer here to their financial gift as money. I want you to notice that he calls it here in *verse 15, sharing*.

This word translated *sharing* is a word he’s already used earlier in chapter 1 where he referred to their partnership or fellowship in the gospel (1:3-5).

This word *partnership* is the word *koinonia*, from the *koinon* word group and it means active participation. Earlier in chapter 1 he used the same root word to describe this church as partakers – same word – with me in grace.^{viii}

He’s effectively saying, “Listen, for all these years now, we have partnered together in not only experiencing the extravagant grace of God, but delivering it through the gospel message.”

Now here in chapter 4, Paul once again uses that same root word as he writes here that you have *shared* with me in this matter.

Yes, Paul implies, I’ve done the preaching and the traveling, but because you supported me and prayed for me – we were actually equal partners with me.

And listen, there’s an unwritten volume here in their loyal support. Other churches had begun criticizing Paul – in his methods and even the emphasis of his message on grace.

The church in Rome here seems to have literally come to the conclusion, as we’ve already studied in

the past, that Paul is deserving of this incarceration and it’s really his own fault.

The Philippians didn’t go along with any of that majority opinion out there about Paul.

And when Paul receives this gift from these believers in Philippi – he transparently tells them in his thank you letter that no one else – but you – stayed with me and supported me.

Beloved, can you imagine what this says about all the other churches? For whatever reason, they missed it. They missed it!

Paul even mentions here in *verse 16 that even in Thessalonica* – next door to their city – *you sent a gift more than once for my needs*.

Where were the others? We’re not told. But the Philippians never gave up on Paul and never forgot him!

Paul effectively says something else to them – not only, thank you for being faithful partners, but secondly, he told them;

2. You are sharing in my reward

Verse 17. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account.

In other words, I’m thrilled to receive your gifts not just because of what they mean for me, but what they mean for you.

This gift is increasing to your own account that which God will one day reward.

Paul is using financial, banking terminology here. The present participle translated “*increases*” – *the profit which increases to your account* – is a word that refers to the multiplication of compounding interest.

Paul is saying, “Get out your spiritual calculators: your gifts to me are actually multiplying your own spiritual interest which is going directly into your own ministry fruit account.”^{ix}

It’s as if Paul is implying in this thank you letter – Friends, there isn’t any other church who considered me worth investing in – but you did – and I can assure you, that your investment is even now multiplying spiritual dividends.

Listen, whenever you invest in someone’s ministry – whenever you share financially in the gospel efforts – you’re not really giving anything away – you’re investing in blue chip stock and the dividends will last forever.

Nobody thought Paul was worthy of investment – but the Philippians did . . . and imagine even to this

day – even in our own lives as we study this letter, they are still having an impact – an impact on us!

And here we are, 1,900 years later saying, we really want to be just like them.

But imagine how all the other churches missed the most important missionary in church history – and the most strategic gospel ambassador to have ever lived.

I can't imagine the potential God has given us through Shepherds seminary – a seminary birthed here on our campus – and mothered along by this church. Listen, let's not miss the potential fruit.

It took us 10 years of development to get 75 graduates; in the last 3 years we've had another 75 graduates. The potential is increasing – like compounding interest . . . don't miss it.

Missionaries and pastors and counselors and teachers and ministry leaders, trained here and invested in here and prayed over here are now serving in 25 different states and in 9 foreign countries.

We don't want to miss this unique opportunity. In fact, come to tonight's graduation in the Chapel and get a front row seat on 26 more graduates who are going to spread out the gospel even further along.

Paul writes; **Thank you for being faithful partners; You are sharing in my reward**

Thirdly, Paul writes –

3. **Your generosity took care of everything I needed**

Notice *verse 18*. ***But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent.***

Paul says the same thing three different ways to add emphasis to his gratitude.

- a. First, he writes, ***I have received everything in full*** – this has a commercial overtone in the language that refers to payments settling all personal debts that someone might have.

And of course we know that Paul actually owed rent – his housing wasn't free and Paul owed the Roman government.

This gift no doubt then settled his back rent and more.

- b. Next he writes, ***I have everything in abundance***. This translates a Greek verb to

have an excess – to literally have more than enough.^x

- c. Finally, he says, ***I am amply supplied*** which means that he's completely filled. In our culture we would understand Paul to mean that his refrigerator, his closet, his bank account and his lease arrangement – all of it is completely supplied.

Not barely . . . but fully! This is a challenging reminder to us as a church and to us as individual believers. Let's not be stingy people. Let's be generous. Let's take care of our global staff and let's pray for our global partners.

And when they come here as guests, or come home on furlough, let's take care of them; let's not give people stuff we don't want or that we've already worn out.

I sat in the home of one of our global staff members years ago in an eastern European capitol city; I asked him questions about the kind of support they received from their supporting churches in the states. They shared the normal kind of stuff and then told me some really surprising things.

They told me that one of their ministry partners had actually received from one of their supporting churches, on more than one occasion, boxes of used teabags . . . used teabags. I said, "You've got to be kidding." He wasn't.

He showed me a big barrel in their closet filled with clothing sent from supporting churches in the states – he laughed and said to me that he hands the clothes out to all the missionary kids on their ministry team on Halloween – and the kids use the clothes to dress up for fun. He said, "None of our kids would ever go out in public wearing these old, dated, worn out articles of clothing."

As they told me all of this, they weren't bitter or resentful – they just shrugged it off and, for the most part, felt sorry – not for themselves – but for the church.

Any church that fails to be generous in the work of the gospel is a spiritually impoverished church.

And the reason they aren't generous – and they ship over old clothing and used tea bags – is because their hearts and their vision and their faith is all shriveled up.

The way you and I give money and material things to the Lord and His servants is really a window through which He – and others – can effectively see into our hearts. I wonder what God and others really see.

But here's the encouraging side of Paul's thank you letter; recognize that you are not giving anything away; you are investing in the greatest enterprise on planet earth.

I couldn't help but think of Hudson Taylor – an incredible missionary to China; founder of the China Inland Mission in 1865. Deeply misunderstood . . . marginalized . . . criticized – primarily because at first he did the unthinkable.

Hudson Taylor shaved off the front half of his hair, dyed the back of his hair black, grew the pigtail and wore a Chinese dress of a teacher.

Many churches and supporters back home in England withdrew their support. Only years later did the world realize the treasure he was.

One man stayed with Hudson Taylor from the beginning days – his name was George Mueller. We often think of George Mueller needing to raise his own support, and he did. But what many aren't aware of is the faithful, ongoing, support that this elder man of faith provided for a younger missionary in China.

He sent a letter to Hudson and I quote, "My dear brother, the work of the Lord in China is more and more laid on my heart, and hence I have been longing and praying to be able to assist it more and more with money, as well as with prayer. Of late I have especially had a desire to help all the dear brethren and sisters with you. My chief object is to tell you that I love you in the Lord and I pray daily for you. I thought it might be a little encouragement to you in your difficulties, trials, hardships and disappointments to hear of one more who felt for you and who remembered you before the Lord."

Enclosed was a check that in today's economy would be worth around \$1,000 dollars. Over the years, the amounts increased, until George Mueller was sending Hudson Taylor, by today's standards, somewhere around \$75,000 dollars every single year.^{xi}

Do you think Mueller gave anything away? Oh no – he had spotted what few others could see – a golden investment – and the interest to his account is still multiplying to this day.

Don't ever think that when you give money or material things to the cause of the gospel that you are giving up anything.

You are giving up nothing . . . you are investing in eternity . . . and you can afford to be generous.

And Paul now provides even more incentives to generous, sacrificial giving; the fourth summary statement in this thank you letter is this;

4. What you did for me is something God took note of.

Notice the latter part of *verse 18*. ***Having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.***

Paul shifts here from the bank to the temple. And he wants them and us to understand that gifts are like sacrifices, laid on the altar to the glory of God.^{xii}

Paul is referring to the Old Testament offering of grain or animals to God and the aromas that ascended were pleasing, as it were, to God.

This language is used metaphorically for the believer in other places in scripture.

- David says that the ***sacrifices that are acceptable to God are a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Psalm 51:17)***;
- Paul urged the Roman believers to ***present their bodies to God as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1)***;
- The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to continually ***offer up to God a sacrifice of praise – that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name (Hebrews 13:15)***; he went on to add in *verse 16*, ***and do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.***

And now here to the Philippians, Paul wants them to understand that they haven't simply given him some money; he wants them to understand that they have done something God didn't miss!

It wasn't a financial withdrawal – it was spiritual worship.

- Do you know what you did when you put money in the offering plate a few moments ago?
- Do you know what you did when you bought some groceries for a family in need?
- Do you know what you did when you wrote a check for a student preparing for ministry?
- Do you know what you did when you offered a servant of Christ your home for some rest or your automobile for travel or your frequent flyer miles for a ticket?

Paul would want you to understand that that your gift wasn't just related to your wealth, it related to your worship. You built an altar and placed on it a precious gift that brought a fragrant aroma into the very presence of God – *an acceptable sacrifice . . . well pleasing to God.*

And now Paul adds a wonderful encouragement for these needy Philippian believers who gave to him out of their own poverty.

Paul writes and I summarize it with this fifth statement:

5. God will respond to your needs just like you responded to mine

Verse 19. And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

And my God – I love that – not just any god – not the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon . . . not the gods of the Egyptians or the Athenians . . . *but my God – my true and living God – shall supply all your needs.*

You Philippians gave out of your poverty, but God is going to give – notice *according to His riches.*

The construction can be understood adverbially to mean this: In return for how you gave to me, God will fulfill all your needs as lavishly as only God can.^{xiii}

And Paul says, He will give to you *according to His riches.* Here's what he means: suppose I need some money and you have a million dollars. If I presented my need to you and you gave me a check for \$10 dollars, you would be giving to me *out of your riches.* But if you gave me a blank check and said, fill in the amount, up to a million dollars – you would be giving to me *according to your riches.*^{xiv}

That's exactly what Paul emphasizes here – notice, *But my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory, by Christ Jesus.*

Now keep in mind that the immediate context here has to do with God meeting the needs of the Philippians as they have met the needs of Paul.

Paul isn't saying here that God will give Christians a blank check for whatever they want or whatever they might think they need.

We learned in our last study from *verse 13 – I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me* – that Paul was not saying, we can do anything

we want to do. And now verse 15 – we can have anything *we* want to have.

The promises here are simply these:
We can do anything *God* wants us to do
We will have everything *God* wants to have. God will give us what we truly need as a result of giving our time and treasure to help others in need.

That's the immediate context. The broader context is that God has promised to meet our needs – legitimate needs that God purposes to meet. He's gonna meet our needs, not our greeds.

Jesus taught us to pray for daily bread, not cake . . . I guess that rules out Krispy Kreme . . . I think.

- No gift we give to others is missed by Him.
- No need we have ourselves is missed by Him.

That doesn't mean life will never go without great needs – but God in His timing will satisfy Himself in our lives.

Hudson Taylor wrote after a devastating time of loss and suffering in the mission there in China – he wrote this to a friend, “I cannot read; I cannot think; I cannot even pray . . . but I can trust.”

On one occasion, their faith was stretched as a mission; Hudson Taylor wrote to a ministry associate – “We have 25 cents to our account – think of it, 25 cents plus all the promises of God.”^{xv}

In writing a thank you letter back to George Mueller on one occasion when his gift had arrived just in time, Hudson Taylor wrote to him and said, “Our faith never was so much tried; God's faithfulness never so much experienced.”^{xvi}

You come to the end of this and you end up trusting God; exercising faith in God; worshipping God; giving glory to God alone; waiting on the providence and provision of God.

Which is why Paul breaks out in this thank you letter with a doxology – it's as if he says, “Okay, now, let's sing.

Verse 20. Now to our God and Faith 'er be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Notice how he shifts from saying *my God* in *verse 19*, to *our God* in *verse 20*.

Paul is effectively saying, “Sing this doxology with me – our worship of the glory of God will be forever and ever.”

And when Paul writes here *Amen* – which means, “Yes, so shall it be” – or, “Yes, that's the truth!”^{xvii}

Paul is writing this in a way that invites the entire Philippian assembly to respond by saying “Amen” as well.

His tone in the letter would have been something like this: *Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever, Amen?* And all the people would say – Amen!

We have 25 cents in our account, plus all the promises of God.

Paul effectively writes, “What can we do but praise Him for His extravagant grace and faithful provision and never-ending, eternal glory.”

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts.
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/15/2016 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Mike Neifert, *Light and Life* (February 1997), p. 27

ii Adapted from Mark Batterson, *The Grave Robber* (Baker Books, 2014), p. 19

iii Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and The New York Times* (Eerdmans, 1999); submitted by Aaron Goerner, Utica, New York; citation:www.preachingtoday.com

iv Sam Gordon, *An Odyssey of Joy: The Message of Philipians* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 179

v William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philipians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 86

vi Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, *Philipians* (Baker Books, 2000), p. 252

vii Boice, p. 251

viii R. Kent Hughes, *Philipians: The Fellowship of the Gospel* (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 190

ix Adapted from Hughes, p. 192

x John MacArthur, *Philipians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 307

xi Adapted from Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: Volume One* (OMF, 1996), p. 183

xii Warren Wiersbe, *Be Joyful: Philipians* (Victor Books, 1978), p. 126

xiii Adapted from David E. Garland, *Philipians: The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 12* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 260

xiv Adapted from J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philipians* (Zondervan, 1973), p. 244

xv Hudson Taylor, Volume 2, p. 256

xvi Hudson Taylor, Volume 2, p. 257

