

INTRODUCTION

We live in a materialistic world. People judge others by what they have – the clothes they wear, the car they drive and the zip code they live in. It is easy to understand why some people see money as an important thing, if not the only important thing. For those who do not want to work hard they resort to a pipe dream to get rich. Many people like to buy lottery tickets. Let me remind you that according to the Bible greed is a sin. Though many people know that playing lottery is a waste of money they do it anyway, thinking that they will never win if they do not give it a try. In 2015 Americans spent \$70 billion in lotto tickets. Now you know where the jackpot money comes from. The odd of winning a grand prize is about 1 in 175 million. A news article points out that the chance is much lower than giving birth to conjoined twins, being attacked by a shark, getting crushed under a vending machine, or becoming the President of the United States. There is no doubt that wealth is God's blessing. But God's blessing is not restricted to money. The apostle Paul was far from rich, but he was content. As Paul wrapped up his letter he thanked the Philippian believers for their financial support. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of a missionary for a moment. Paul was a traveling evangelist. He did not have a permanent home. He was all by himself. He raised most of his expenses by working a job. Does anyone remember what Paul's profession was? He was a tentmaker. Today, we use the term "tentmaker" to describe those missionaries who use their expertise to support themselves. There are some countries where missionaries cannot go into as evangelists. Therefore, they have to apply for a work visa in order to get there. From Paul's sharing we can understand God's heart on money. God blesses us first so that we can become a blessing to others.

EXPLANATION

1. 信心的試驗 Test of Faith

First of all, money is a test of our faith to God. Paul thanked the Philippian church for their financial subsidy. But it was not like he would be starving without the church's support. He stated that he could be content in any circumstance. He elaborated his thoughts in **verse 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. Paul learned the lesson of contentment no matter how much he had. Contentment means that you are satisfied with whatever you have. Some people may say: I will be content if I have more money. No, they won't! If they cannot be happy when they have little they will not be happy even when they have more. Paul said he had learned the secret of being content. What was his secret? The answer is in **verse 13**: I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Some people misuse this verse, thinking that it can work like a magic wand. Paul was not saying that if you want ten thousand dollars then the money will drop down from the sky. Paul meant that regardless of how much he had, God's work would not be hindered. Paul could serve God equally effectively when he had more resources or fewer. Money is a test of our faith to God. It is easier for us to seek God when we are in need. Naturally, we will be humbled when we are lacking. But when we are well-fed we forget about God. After I graduated from school in U.S. it

took me three months to find my first job. I prayed hard and often for God to show me the right way. Our savings in the bank dropped down to 3 digits, and that included a decimal point! But then after working for a while I started taking my salary for granted. My wife and I agree that God has never made us wealthy. Whenever we had a little more savings then our car broke down or something like that would happen. God taught us to put our faith in Him. Someone said it wisely: prosperity has done more damage to believers than has adversity. A simple test of our faith is for God to take away our money. Do we still give thanks for the limited resources we have? God did that to Job in the Old Testament. Job was a rich man who loved God. Satan argued that Job loved God because God gave Job all the goodies and protected him with a fence. God then allowed Satan to attack Job. Thus, Job lost all his possessions and even his children. Job's wife grumbled that Job had better abandoned God and committed suicide. Most of you should know a familiar statement from Job in **1:21** of the book: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." Job passed the test of his faith. He remained loyal to God even though what he experienced was contrary to how God's blessing should look like. Proverbs has a lot of wise insights on money. One of which is in **30:8-9** – 8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. 9 Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. That is so true. Money can easily become one's god. Some people worship money because it makes them feel empowered. We Chinese say that: money is not all-powerful; but without it you will become powerless. No wonder Jesus said that it is hard for wealthy people to enter the Kingdom of God. They may wonder who still need God when they already have everything in their hands. The truth is, when we have God and nothing else we can truly be content.

2. 福音的工具 Tool for Gospel

Paul told us that money is a test of our faith to God. Money can also be used as a tool for sharing the gospel. The Philippian church had supported Paul on multiple occasions. He said in **verses 15-16**: 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Paul started the Philippian church in his second mission journey. The background is recorded in Acts chapter 16. After Paul founded the church he went southward to Thessalonica, where he encountered opposition from some Jews. Subsequently, he traveled to Athens and later to Corinth. Paul testified that even after he had left Philippi the believers kept sending him subsidies. In fact, it was the only church that provided for his needs during that period of time. Bible scholars believed that it might have been 10 years after Paul had left the area when this letter was written. The Philippian church still had a very close relationship with Paul. Now they heard that Paul was in jail. Therefore, they quickly sent Epaphroditus to bring resources to him. This church established by a missionary eagerly looked for opportunities to return the favor. However, Paul told us that the money and materials they sent were more than an expression of kindness. In the NIV translation the word "share" appears in both verses 14 and 15. It is the same Greek word that is rendered as "fellowship" in other parts of the New Testament. We now call our Friday meeting "fellowship." The term actually means partnership, whether in good times or bad. Therefore, by supporting Paul the church was working together

with him. They helped Paul so that he could take the gospel to other places. It was a form of spiritual investment. By supplying for Paul, the church gained something in return. In **verse 17** Paul explained what dividend the church “earned” in such investment: Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. This help given to Paul reflected good spiritual health of the believers. Not only did they care about the needs inside the church, they were also mindful of an evangelist like Paul. Missionaries need a home, food, clothes and everything else just like we do. They have to find their monetary support somewhere. It is a beautiful thing that part of the offering we receive in our church goes to mission work – both local and global. God may not call most of us to become missionaries. But as we support their work we are investing in mission. In addition to regular offering, every year we also have a few special fund drives to collect special offerings for mission organizations. It is very encouraging to see that the money we collected always exceeded the goals. I thank God for the generosity of our brothers and sisters. I do not know who gave the money and how much. What I hope to happen is that the donation did not come from only a few brothers or sisters who gave larger amounts. Instead, I would like to see more people contributing smaller portions. It does not matter if it is only 5 or 10 dollars. The more important thing is that you respond with love when you see the needs. God is pleased to use the 5 dollars from this person, 50 from another person to fulfill the needs. Also, we often give away money without any knowledge of how it will be used. I am not saying that we need to worry if the money finally ends up being used in the mission fields. But we should maintain a close relationship with the parties we support. We pay attention to their newsletter, care about their well-being and pray for their needs.

3. 對神的感恩 Thanks to God

Money is a test of our faith to God. Money can be used as a tool to expand the gospel. Thirdly, the way we use money expresses our thankfulness to God. Besides being grateful to the church, Paul also showed his gratitude to God. Paul said in the second half of **verse 18**: ...now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. Here Paul used ritual terminology. The Philippian believers set aside the money like a thanksgiving gift to God. According to the Old Testament Law, Jews had to observe 7 major festivals in a year. One of them is called the Feast of the First Fruits. When the farmers saw the first sign of grains in spring barley they would tie a ribbon around each budding stem. When ripen, this first batch of grains would be taken to the temple as an offering. It is an expression of thankfulness to the Lord. The farmers did not have to worry that they would not have enough if they gave to God first. It is likely that the first-fruits are the best portions because the crops are growing the fastest. At harvest time, the Jews joyfully celebrated their hard work, and presented the first-fruits to God. Animal sacrifice would also be offered. They gave thanks to God for His faithful provision. What we can learn from this practice? Every time you get your pay-check you can set aside your “first-fruits” to the Lord. Trust me on this: if you put mortgage, car loan, tuition, food and everything else on higher priorities you may feel that you do not have any money left for offering. There may be no joy in your offering too. We will stay stingy if we keep thinking that our money is ours. It is true that you have to pour in long hours at the work place and you may have to deal with a harsh boss, in exchange for a pay-check. The money you offer should come from your love to God. Regardless of how much you give, and even if you do not give a penny we still welcome you to this church. However, if you do drop money in the offering plate please do so with a thankful heart to the Lord. Some Christians use ten percent as a

guideline. I will not make it a rule that you must give ten percent. If you read the Old Testament Law carefully the tithe that the Jews were required to contribute was actually 13.3%. Besides the ten percent they had to offer each year, they gave an extra ten percent every three years. Therefore, if you are follow this tradition then you need to give 13.3%. You know, if we keep it strictly legalistic we may resort to doing a minimum. We feel that we are off the hook when we fulfill the obligation. What if God blesses you more? For example, what if you have a surprising extra income or your company give you a year-end bonus to reward you for your good performance? The amount you offer should not only be in proportion to what you earn. From a Biblical standpoint it should also be a reflection of how thankful you are to God. Paul reminded us in [2 Corinthians 9:6-7](#) that: 6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Those who receive a bigger financial blessing from God have a greater freedom to offer to support God's work. Paul emphasized the same key here: give with a cheerful and thankful heart. At my home church in Hong Kong coworkers published offering number from each individual or family. Therefore, everyone would know if brother Choi offered \$50 in April. It would be quite awkward if there was only one brother Choi in the church! Another interesting practice was that the pastor served as an auditor for offering. He knew how much everyone contributed. One time he even questioned a brother: "Hey, brother Zhang how come I didn't see your offering?" The brother replied; "Well, pastor, I did offer but I felt the burden to contribute to mission organizations outside of our church who are financially tight." Rest assured, your pastor will not do the same things here. I do not have any interest in helping you manage your finance. Ultimately, money offering is a matter between you and the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Our God is gracious and kind. He is generous in blessing all His children. It does not mean that everyone of us will be rich by the world's standard. However, whatever we have is from Him. We can keep all the money we have and still think that we do not have enough. But we can also joyfully share what we have with others. God wants to bless us first so that we can become a blessing to others. Let me conclude with a true story. A church in Chicago started a building expansion project. It needed more space for a growing congregation. To secure a building loan for the \$3.5 million plan a deposit of \$300,000 was required. The leadership did not know where to get the money they needed. A lady stepped in and provided the money with a single coin. It is a rare 1866 gold coin that was worth \$20 at face value. The widow's late husband was a coin collector. He bought the coin for \$125,000. It was estimated that the coin would be worth at least \$300,000 in auction. The woman wanted to stay anonymous. She said that she was content with a roof over her head and food on the table. She was not looking for more wealth. She just wanted to bless the church with what she could offer. You and I do not need to be a collector or a millionaire before we can bless others. All it takes is a submissive heart for the Lord to use whatever He gives us in the first place.