

CHOOSING AN ATTITUDE OF THANKFULNESS

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Text: Philippians 4:4-7

An international health study revealed some startling information about depression. On September 15, 1996, the World Health Organization and the World Bank released their findings on the world's greatest health problems. Christopher Murray, professor of health economics at Harvard University, was the study's chief author. One of the most significant findings was their prediction that "major depression will become the second-leading cause of disability in 2020." Major depression was the fourth-leading cause of disability in 1990. On October 10, 1996, the sixth annual National Depression Screening Day was held. Dr. Douglas Jacobs, the Harvard psychiatrist who founded this program for free, annual screenings, said, "Over the last five years, we have screened two hundred thousand people. Seventy percent were ill and needed some kind of treatment." He pointed out that about seventeen million Americans agonize with this illness to varying degrees, and about thirty thousand take their own lives each year. The perceived progress of society is not diminishing depression. Technological advancements cannot provide the peace that only comes through Jesus Christ. --Houston Chronicle, Sept. 16, 1996, p. 1A; Parade, Sept. 29, 1996, p. 16

Our sense of gratitude and peace of mind is often tied to our circumstances. If all is well we are usually thankful—if all is not well we do not usually feel thankful. Yet, Paul calls us through a clear exhortation to choose a thankful attitude in spite of our circumstances and to live at peace in every circumstance.

Paul writes in Philippians 4:4 *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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."* NIV

His aim is to help us see that the *promises* of God's word are ours if we will make the right choices about our attitude. Note that...

I. AN ATTITUDE OF THANKFULNESS MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO REJOICE IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULTIES (vv. 4-6a).

A. Rejoicing is a chosen activity (v. 4).

In the context of the chapter there is not much over which Paul or the church has to rejoice. Nevertheless, Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” *NIV*

Evidently, Paul expected the church to make the same decision that he had made—to rejoice!

Robert Louis Stevenson, the great Scottish author who wrote *Treasure Island*, was accustomed to bedridden illnesses. Although frequently ill, he remained eternally optimistic. One day his wife approached him after a terrible coughing spell and remarked, “I expect you still believe it’s a wonderful day.” Stevenson confidently replied, “I do. I will never permit a row of medicine bottles to block my horizon.” We can focus on the medicine bottles (or debts, disappointments, conflicts, etc.,) or we can keep our sights set on the horizon of God’s hope.

--The Winning Attitude, John Maxwell, 1992, p. 122

B. The faithfulness of God alleviates the fear of need (v. 6).

Need comes in various forms. It cannot be limited to the need for money or material possessions. There can also be a need of emotional and physical well being.

II. AN ATTITUDE OF THANKFULNESS TRANSFORMS OUR PERSPECTIVE (v. 5).

A. We can be kind and gentle with others when we have a thankful attitude (v. 5a).

The Japanese have a great “word picture” for flexibility. In Japan, people are encouraged to be “the wise bamboo.” The bamboo preserves itself by bending in the wind rather than breaking with rigidity. In life we are continuously confronted with situations that force us to decide whether we will bend or break. Sadly, we too often choose to break rather than give some ground and preserve a relationship, idea, or goal. May we pray for wisdom to know which endeavors are best served with a gentle bend.

--Reader's Digest, April 1999, p. 137

B. The nearness of the Lord's return is a great consolation (v. 5b).

A cartoon pictured a little boy asking his father a very important question: “Daddy, what is a Christian?” The father thought for a moment and then replied, “A Christian is a person who loves and obeys God. He loves his friends, his neighbors, and even his enemies. He is kind and gentle and prays a lot. He looks forward to going to heaven and thinks that knowing God is better than anything on this earth. That, son, is a Christian!” The little boy took a couple of moments to contemplate what his father had said, and then asked, “Daddy, have I ever seen a Christian?”

--Pulpit Helps, July 1999, p. 6

III. AN ATTITUDE OF THANKFULNESS TOWARD GOD ASSURES A SENSE OF PEACE (v. 7).

A. The peace that comes from God can accomplish more than the human mind can conceive (v. 7a).

After World War II, the Allied armies provided food and shelter for many homeless children. They were put together in large camps where they received more than sufficient food and care. Surprisingly, these well-fed children did not sleep well at night. They appeared to be restless and afraid. To remedy the problem, a psychologist suggested that each child should be given a slice of

bread to hold at night. If they were hungry, another piece of bread would be provided, but the single slice was to be held, not eaten. The results were astounding. The children began to rest peacefully. The sensation of holding the bread gave them a sense of security and hope. They began to experience the peace that David knew when he wrote, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

--The Twenty-Third Psalm, Charles Allen, 1961, p. 15

B. The peace that comes from God will stand guard at the heart of a thankful person (v. 7b).

CONCLUSION

Had Payne Stewart died five years earlier, he would have been remembered in an entirely different manner. But because of the rearrangement of his priorities just a few years before his death, he has been memorialized as a family man who loved God. His relationship with Jesus Christ was the most important aspect of his life but it hadn't always been that way.

Throughout most of his career, this celebrity golfer was known more for his competitive spirit, unusual clothes, and cocky attitude. When he reevaluated his life as a man approaching forty, he discovered the need to abandon his self-serving priorities and embrace Jesus Christ as his Lord. Ironically, his golf game dramatically improved once he put his priorities in proper order.

When his jet went down on October 25, 1999, grief surrounded those closest to him because of the wonderful man he had become. Some of those most deeply affected by Stewart's death were his numerous friends on the Professional Golf Association Tour. Many of these were making preparations for the Tour Championship in Houston, Texas, when they learned of their friend's death. All of them wrestled with ways to appropriately remember him.

One of the most unique memorials was provided by Bob Estes, a fellow golfer and Christian who was deeply affected by Stewart's faith. On the first hole of his first round, Estes took his putter to the tee box. He stood over the ball for a few moments then putted it about fifteen feet. He then quietly said, "That's for Payne."

In a game where each stroke can be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, Bob Estes voluntarily gave up a stroke to make an important point. He later said, “It was symbolic of the last putt he (Stewart) made to win the U.S. Open. But maybe more importantly, it also had to do with the way Payne had changed. The way faith and family and friends were his top priorities. It meant I wasn’t worried about the first hole or the score I shot. All of us need to remember what’s most important.”

Ibid., Oct. 29, 1999, p. 2B