

Un Ungrateful Apostle?
Philippians 4:10-20, and A Biblical View of Thanksgiving

by Daniel Istrate, Ph.D.

A couple of hours after our daughter was born, I took our almost three-year-old son to the hospital to see his baby sister. To make this initial meeting more special, my wife and I had prepared a gift for him to receive at the hospital, telling him it was from his little sister (it was a toy doctor's kit, which he presently started using to consult her!). But we also prepared a gift that he would give to his sister, which he proceeded to do. After passing the gift on to her, to our amusement and delight, he turned to us and exclaimed, "But she didn't say *Thank you!*"

We think well of those who use their *Please* and *Thank you*, and regard them as civil and respectful. Conversely, we do not appreciate demanding and ungrateful attitudes in others. So, we attempt to teach children early on not to forget those important words as they grow and relate to other people. Our son's expectation was justified, yet he did not grasp the inability of a newly born to show or verbalize gratefulness.

During a prayer gathering in which members in the congregation would bring to the attention of the church various prayer requests, as well as short reports on the situations surrounding those requests, someone mentions that he or she has visited another church member in the nursing home, and asks the church to pray for that member's needs. To this, the leader of the prayer time replies, "*Thank you* for visiting so-and-so in the nursing home!"

While home on furlough a missionary is invited to address the congregation, and these are his beginning words: I just wanted to say *Thank you* for your prayer and financial support during our time on the field. We really could not have done it

without your help. The Lord has used us in His work, but *Thank you* for your part in that great effort."

Somewhere else, the pastor makes it a habit of sending *Thank you* notes at the end of the year to church goers, whether thanking them for their attendance, for their financial giving, or for their involvement in the ministry of that respective church. Or, an itinerant preacher states that he gives his tithes and offering to the churches he visits, and only one or two churches ever send him a *Thank you* note for doing so. And a common happening in churches where an individual or a group sing a special song, or play the piano, or recite an edifying poem: the leader gets up after them and says, *Thank you* for this song, or for that poem...

Or, after a busy week of Vacation Bible School, the director stands up during the VBS closing program and says, "I would like to *thank* all volunteers for everything they put into making this program a success. Could all those who helped with the VBS this week please stand up? *Thank you* very much for all your effort and dedication. *Thank you* for all your patience and love for the children, as well as for your willingness to sacrifice of your time and yourselves. May God bless you all!"

Indeed, the Bible does exhort us to be grateful people, always giving thanks for all things (Col 3:15-17; Eph 5:20; 1 Thess 5:18). Yet, are there perhaps situations where *Thank you* is not appropriate? What does thanksgiving look like in the life of biblical writers, and what can we learn about it particularly from the life of the apostle Paul? Judging by his use of *Thank you* in his letters and the book of *Acts*, one might be tempted to accuse the apostle as being ungrateful. We learn from these writings that Paul was a tent-maker, meaning that during his missionary journeys he did not want to be a burden for the churches he was just starting, so he rather worked to provide for his own needs. However, at times he was unable to do so, due whether to economic factors or to persecution; at other times he devoted

himself fully to the work of the ministry, which would leave no time for him to make a living.

Yet, we also learn that there was one church that stood by him financially, sending him gifts more than once. That was the church in Philippi, and Paul's letter to the Philippians seems to be occasioned by such a gift, sent to him while he was imprisoned in Rome. Students of the letter often refer to it as Paul's *Thank you* note to the church in Philippi.¹ Yet, where in it does Paul say *Thank you* to these believers for their gift? He does not; at least not in the words we would use. Should he have thanked them? Would this omission qualify him as an *ungrateful* apostle? Let us look at the segment in the letter that specifically deals with this topic:

Philippians 4:10-20 ¹⁰ *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.* ¹¹ *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.* ¹² *I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.* ¹³ *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* ¹⁴ *Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.* ¹⁵ *And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only.* ¹⁶ *Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.* ¹⁷ *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.* ¹⁸ *I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.* ¹⁹ *And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.* ²⁰ *To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*²

¹ Note, for example, Homer A. Kent Jr.'s statement about Paul's letter to the Philippians, "This is probably not his first note of thanks to them..." (*Philippians*, in *EBC* 11 [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978], 154).

² English Standard Version

It is clear in this passage that the apostle received gifts from the Philippians. Then why, one may ask, could Paul not bring himself to simply say *Thank you* to them for their generosity? What did Paul know and is teaching us by example, yet we perhaps might not have noticed? When we study Paul's use of the word εὐχαριστέω (*I give thanks*), as well as εὐχαριστία (*thankfulness* or *gratitude*), and εὐχάριστος (*thankful*),³ we begin to see a pattern. Whether stated or implied in the context, every time Paul employs one of these words he has God as the receiver of thanksgiving, except for Rom 16:4. We shall first take a look at the latter before addressing the former.

As part of his section on commendations and greetings (Rom 16:1-16), Paul asks the church in Rome to greet Prisca and Aquila for risking their own necks on behalf of Paul; to these two, says Paul, οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνος εὐχαριστῶ ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν - *not only I am thankful, but also all the churches among the Gentiles*. We do not know the circumstances of Paul's deliverance at the expense of the two, yet Paul publicly expresses his gratitude to his benefactors. It is a secondary matter whether Paul had a chance to say *Thank you* to them personally, yet one may assume he did. Thus, expressing thanks to others is modeled by the apostle here.

However, the issue is not whether or not the apostle said *Thank you*, but to whom and for what. In the instance above, he expressed his thanks to Priscilla and Aquila for a special favor they had done for him; at their intervention Paul's life was preserved, and the benefits of their action have extended not only to the churches he started and taught, but to the whole Christendom after them.

³ εὐχαριστέω (Rom 1:8, 21; 14:6; 16:4; 1 Cor 1:4, 14; 10:30; 11:24; 14:17f; 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 1:16; 5:20; Phil 1:3; Col 1:3, 12; 3:17; 1 Thess 1:2; 2:13; 5:18; 2 Thess 1:3; 2:13; Phlm 1:4); εὐχαριστία (1 Cor 14:16; Eph 5:4; Col 2:7; 4:2); and εὐχάριστος (Col 3:15). Cf. D. Fürst, "Thank, Praise Eucharist," in *NIDNTT*, 3:816-820.

As already noted above, all the other times Paul uses εὐχαριστέω or a related word, whether or not he or someone else is the subject, thanksgiving is always God-oriented, with God receiving the thanks; this is most often stated (notice the presence of τῷ θεῷ, *to God*), or clearly implied by the context.⁴ And, what are some reasons for Paul's thanksgiving to God? While exhorting others to give thanks in all things, and while pointing out that unbelievers have neither honored their Maker nor thanked Him (Rom 1:21), Paul most often expresses his gratitude to God in the context of prayer, usually for believers' conversion as well as the Christian virtues manifested in their lives. If the recipients of his letters received the preached message as God's Word, as it is indeed, Paul is thankful to God (1 Thess 2:13); if they were given God's grace in Christ, he thanks God for it (1 Cor 1:4); if they manifest growing faith, he thanks God for His work in their lives (2 Thess 1:3); and for all three cardinal virtues evident in their walk, Paul expresses gratitude to God (Col 1:3-5, 1 Thess 1:2-4), as well as for God's election of believers manifested through their clear conversion, their suffering for His Name's sake, and their witness (1 Thess 1:2-10).

Here we should note that whatever Christian virtue and evidence of faith is at work in the lives of believers, Paul does not thank men for such, but rather His thanksgiving goes to God. This is what Paul teaches by example, so we submit it should become the operating principle for our thanksgiving as well. This is what in the end motivates Paul not to say *Thank you* to the Philippian believers even when they sent him gifts meant to aid and assist him in his work of the ministry. To this

⁴ For example, the first two instances listed here have God as the receiver of thanksgiving, while the third one strongly implies it: Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου (*I give thanks to my God ...*, 1 Cor 1:4); Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ του κυρίου ἡμῶν (*We give thanks to God the Father of our Lord ...*, Col 1:3); and ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus...*, 1 Thess 5:18).

specific Philippian case we shall now turn, looking especially to the more extensive passage quoted above (Phil 4:10-20).

As we already pointed out, it is noteworthy that Paul avoids thanking the church for their gifts to him. Why? The key is found at the beginning of the letter, where Paul puts things in perspective, which point of view he maintains and strengthens in our passage. If anyone in Philippi expected Paul to start his letter with a big *Thank you*, they got their wish; however, this *Thank you* is not unto them, but to Whom it properly belongs: ^{1:3}*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you*. Yes, they are in his prayer of thanksgiving, yet the thanks go to God, while they are the reason for such thanks. And more specifically, why would they be the reason? We see this in vv. 5-6, ⁵*because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*. ⁶*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*. We notice two reasons here for Paul's thanksgiving to God for the Philippian believers: for their partnership in the Gospel, and for his assurance that the Lord would perfect them unto the day of Jesus Christ. His first reason is taken up in our passage, 4:10-20.

Paul starts and ends with a proper, biblical view of thanksgiving. He does not dare say *Thank you* to them for three reasons: first, because their gifts represent one aspect of their partnership or participation in the gospel; second, their gifts are an investment into their heavenly bank account; and third, their gifts are to be seen as a sacrificial offering unto God. How could Paul interfere between them and the Lord and say *Thank you* to them?

First, their gifts are an expression of their participation or *fellowship* (κοινωνία, 1:5) in the Gospel - for this Paul gives thanks to God in 1:3-5, theme which he picks up in 4:10-20. Here he commends them for their concern for his needs, yet because his needs spring from his life dedication to the spread of the

gospel, he clearly perceives and teaches that what the Philippians sacrificially⁵ give is unto the Lord, for thus they have become partners or *have entered into fellowship* (κοινωνέω, 4:15) with Paul in the same work of the kingdom. Having put their giving in such perspective, clarifying that what they sent is done unto the Lord, sent as their part unto the work of the Master, would Paul dare say *Thank you* to them for their giving unto Another, unto the Master who employed them both and into whose service they are equal partners?

Second, their gifts represent an investment unto their eternity, as he notes in v.17, *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit* (or, as a few other versions put it, *I seek for the profit which increases to your account*). In light of this, and in the larger picture, what they give is unto their heavenly reward, a deposit that gets credited in their eternal bank account, so how could Paul dare rob them of such reward by giving them thanks in the here and now?

And third, Paul thinks of the Philippians' gifts as ὀσμὴν εὐωδίας, θυσίαν δεκτὴν, εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ (*a fragrant offering or pleasing aroma, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*, 4:18). The language of *sacrifice* brought unto the LORD God goes back to Genesis 4 and is found throughout the Old Testament; the *fragrant offering or pleasing aroma* likewise first characterizes Noah's burnt offerings to the LORD in Genesis 8:20-21, and continues to speak of the sacrifices offered by God's faithful until the coming of Christ our Savior, who offered Himself up on our behalf and for our sake as προσφορὰν καὶ θυσίαν τῷ θεῷ εἰς ὀσμὴν εὐωδίας (*an offering and sacrifice to God, to be a pleasing aroma unto*

⁵ We learn that the churches in Macedonia, including the one in Philippi, were both under persecution and in extreme poverty, yet the grace of God led them to become very generous, giving themselves first to God, and through that also surrendering unto Him everything they possessed. As such, Paul uses them as an example of generosity for the believers in Corinth (see 2 Cor 8:1-6).

Him).⁶ Thus, Paul understands the Philippians' giving as an act of worship unto the eternal God, a sacrifice well-pleasing to Him, so the gift is His - how could he dare interfere and set himself up between the Philippian believers and their Master by offering them a misplaced *Thank you*? Imagine an Israelite bringing an offering on the altar in Jerusalem, and a fellow Israelite approaching him and saying, *Thank you* for that wonderful sacrifice!

This, we submit, is Paul's view of thanksgiving, a view that is biblical, God honoring, and church-edifying. His apparent *ungratefulness* is teaching us to Whom we should direct our thanksgiving. Horizontal thanksgiving is right for things that people do for each other, and it should be strongly encouraged! However, when someone does something unto the Lord, as a fellow-partner in the Gospel, as an investment for eternity, and as an offering and sacrifice unto God, may we raise our voice and give thanks to the Giver of every good gift for His work of grace among men, even as we recognize their contribution. God will be honored through this, and the brother or sister involved will be much more edified in the faith when our thanks go not to them but rather to God on their behalf.

⁶ See also William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), 208-209.

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Abstract: Paul receives a gift from the Philippian believers, yet in his letter to them he does not thank them for it. Does this make the apostle *ungrateful*? Paul's uses of εὐχαριστέω (*I give thanks*) and related words are all God-oriented (except Rom 16:4), teaching us that our thanksgiving should be primarily to God. Yes, we are to be grateful to each other as well when things are done for us (cf. Rom 16:4), yet whenever someone does something similar to the Philippians' giving to Paul - which Paul sees as a participation in the gospel, as an investment into the Philippians eternal reward, and as a pleasing sacrifice to God - whenever such is the case, our thanksgiving should be oriented to God for His work of grace among fellow believers.

Key words: thanksgiving, ungrateful, εὐχαριστέω, investment, sacrifice