

The Secret

In the name of him in whom we are strengthened to do all things, dear friends in Christ: Secrets. There's something compelling about them, isn't there? Almost everyone likes being in on a secret. We like having the inside scoop, that bit of knowledge that very few people are privy to. We like the sense of (what shall we say?) Power? Control? Superiority? ... Maybe it's just smugness that being in on a secret gives: "I know something you don't know." And I think too that there's very little we hate more than to know that other people with whom we are acquainted are keeping a secret among themselves, and in particular, keeping it from us. If we know there's a secret out there, we want to know what it is.

And this goes a long way to explain why when a book entitled *The Secret* came out about six years back, it was an immediate sensation. Written by Rhonda Byrne, this little book promised to reveal to its readers the secret to happiness, to success in life, and to getting all your dreams fulfilled. For a while copies sold like hotcakes, and they're still moving off bookstore shelves. I was going to check out the local library's copy to show you, but there's still a waiting list for those who want to read it. Surely some of you have heard of it or had it recommended to you by friends. I wonder, has anyone here read it?

Well, if you have read it, I'm sorry you wasted your time. And if you haven't, don't bother: I'm going to tell you what the secret is. Are you ready? It's the Universal Law of Attraction. "What's that?" you ask. In the author's own words, "[Your] [T]houghts are magnetic, and thoughts have a frequency. As you think, those thoughts are sent out into the Universe, and they magnetically attract all like things that are on the same frequency. Everything sent out returns to its source. And that source is You."

Got that? It's like the universe itself is a magnanimous (albeit impersonal) deity that rewards or punishes you according to how you think. If you think positive thoughts, good things will come your way. If you have negative thoughts, you attract bad things to yourself. So, let's say you want to lose weight. Instead of thinking about how heavy you are and how much weight you have to lose and all the exercise and dieting you'll have to do (because those are negative thoughts which only cause you to gain weight by thinking them) you think about being slim and fit, and how good you look and feel, and *that* will attract a slimmer, fitter body to you. Or let's say you want to have more money. Who doesn't? The mistake most people make is to think about how bad it is to be short on cash. They think about working harder, or going to school and learning what they need to know to get a better paying job. How foolish! All that negativity drives money away from you. No, the secret is to imagine yourself rich. Think of having money, of spending money, of your mailbox stuffed full of checks that people have sent you for no apparent reason—and voilà! The money will come pouring in. And no, I'm not making this up. This is what *The Secret* is all about. And the only person this secret ever made rich is the author because she wrote this nonsense and people are still paying her for it.

Of course, the flip side of it (according to the author) is that everything bad that happens is caused by people attracting it to themselves through their negative thinking. So, take the terror attacks of 9-11: those planeloads of passengers who got stuck with terrorists on board their flights? They brought it on themselves. They all must have been thinking, "My, how terrible it would be to have terrorists on board who wanted to take over our plane and turn it into a flying bomb!" And the victims in the Trade Towers and Pentagon? Same thing. They went to

work that day begging for disaster by the massive field of negative magnetic energy they were sending out into the universe. The universe was only responding to their bad thoughts in the only way it could: think about planes crashing into your building and that's what you get. Did I mention that you should not waste your time or money on *The Secret*?

So, why am I talking about it? First to warn you; but more to the point, in today's Epistle St. Paul speaks of having learned a genuine secret that serves him in this life. It's a secret that all of us who are in Christ can take advantage of; but we have to understand what it is. You see, the author of *The Secret* would distort what Paul says in today's lesson to prove her point. After all, didn't we heard him say, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is anything of excellence, anything worthy of praise, *think about these things*"? See? He's telling us to have positive thoughts. Think good thoughts and good things are bound to happen. The Bible says so. Q.E.D.

And listen, I won't deny that having a positive attitude is helpful. If you're always going around thinking, "Oh, woe is me. It'll never work. I can't do anything right. There's no way out of this bad situation, nothing I can do to make things better", well, thoughts like those are self-fulfilling because you'll never even try to do anything constructive. People with a more positive attitude are at least going to try to do something to fix whatever's wrong, which will vastly improve their odds of making things better. But even with the best attitude and the most positive thoughts, you can still fail. Something like three quarters of all new businesses go under in their first year. And no one starts a business hoping to go bankrupt. They all plan to succeed. And I don't care who you are, even if you've got all the positivity in the universe radiating magnetically from your head, if you step out in front of a fast moving truck, the impact on the quality of your life will be negative: you'll be squashed like a bug. So, while having a positive attitude can be helpful, it's no guarantee of success. And the so-called secret of the power of positive thinking is a farce that has nothing whatsoever to do with what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle.

That's because Paul isn't talking about the secret of achieving success or of getting rich or of having all your dreams come true or of having a happy life in which everything that ever happens to you is good. No, he's talking about the secret of finding contentment in any and every circumstance in which you may find yourself. It's vital that we understand this. As Paul pens these words he is in prison in Rome. This is actually his second imprisonment there. The first time he spent a couple of years under what we would call house arrest. He could freely study, read, write, receive visitors, teach, hold worship services, and even get out and around as long as he was in the company of the guards who were assigned to watch him. As it turns out, many of those imperial guards converted to Christianity because they had to sit there and listen to him teach, and they in turn shared Christ with their families and fellow soldiers.

Paul was eventually tried, found innocent, and released from that situation. But times have since changed in Rome. The authorities are now aggressively persecuting Christians. And as a leader of the movement, Paul finds himself in a stinking dungeon where conditions are utterly deplorable. There are no comforts here. And this time he believes that his upcoming trial will very likely result in his death. To make things worse, a lot of the people with whom he had worked and whom he trusted have abandoned him. They couldn't take the heat. Paul very much feels a sense of betrayal – and sadness too that these men who had boldly confessed Christ were now renouncing him. Meanwhile, Paul's enemies were living it up, thrilled that their powerful adversary was finally going to be silenced.

And Paul knows that there are other problems out there. As he writes this letter to the church at Philippi, he warns them that in addition to the persecution that will soon spread from Rome to them, many false teachers will worm their way into their congregation. Paul knows that this young church is going to be facing the threat of violence from without and the poison of false doctrine from within – and he tells them that they need to stand firm against both. If not, all the work he did to advance Christ’s kingdom among them, and all the prayers and encouragement he’s offered since, not to mention the public beating he received there at the hands of the local magistrates, all that would be for naught.

What I’m saying is that Paul has plenty of reasons to be thoroughly depressed and disheartened at the way things are turning out. This is not how Paul hoped things would be. And yet, in the midst of all this trouble and uncertainty we hear him telling the faithful at Philippi to rejoice. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! Let your reasonableness be known to all.” Why? “[Because] the Lord is at hand.” The word there awkwardly translated “reasonableness” carries the idea of gentleness, forbearance, and consideration. The idea is that we Christians ought to be known for our kindness and our willingness to accept insult and injury without becoming angry or upset. The reason for this is that we know that the Lord Jesus is near us – near us especially when we suffer, for it is he who bears with us all our grief and pain. Our suffering is his, and it’s outward verification that we are faithful – faithful enough to be counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. It’s a high honor, as Jesus himself declares, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Paul continues, “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” These days a lot of people use the word “anxious” to mean “eager”, like when they say they’re anxious for something long hoped for to happen; but that’s a misuse of the word. Anxious comes from anxiety, which means “worry” or “fear”. Paul is saying don’t worry and fret about things you can’t control. Instead, by prayer hand your concerns over to the Lord who does control all things, and who is all wise, and who in Christ Jesus loves you more than you can possibly imagine. Trust him to work all things for the best, even as he has promised to do. And then you will experience true peace of mind. You’ll be certain that whatever happens, whether good or bad, fits perfectly into the Lord’s gracious will. You don’t have to understand it. All you need to do is trust in the Lord who does.

And to assist in this regard, it’s at this point that Paul encourages his readers to concentrate their attention on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, excellent, and praiseworthy. This is not just an exhortation to think about positive things – all the good things that are in the world. No, Paul has in mind the good things the Lord has done and is continuing to do for his people. These are the things that are the most true, honorable, pure and so on. He’s saying remember that you are a child of God, an heir of his heavenly kingdom – made so by your Baptism into Christ. Remember that you were purchased from sin and death by Lord Jesus who gave up his life on the cross to pay the penalty of your sin. Remember that he rose from the dead – defeating death forever – and that through him you have the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Think about how through Jesus you have received the Holy Spirit who enables you both to will and to do the good works that God desires and that benefit your fellow Christians. Think about how the Lord even now continues to build you up in holy faith through the proclamation of his Word and by giving you the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper. These are the things Paul taught all the churches. These are the things that he

practiced while he was among them – and that he wants them (and us) to continue to practice for by them we can be sure that the God of peace is with us.

It's at this point that Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, expresses his gratitude for a gift he had received from them. Apparently they had heard of his imprisonment, so they sent a care package of some kind – probably money, clothing, blankets, and other items. And that would have been especially welcome because prisoners back in those days were required to arrange for their own food, laundry services, and other needs. It was quite different than how we do things today. Back then you had to have friends on the outside to take care of you; and as I've already indicated, most of Paul's had abandoned him. So whatever the Philippians sent would have been helpful.

But the interesting thing is that Paul rejoices not so much for the gift itself and the benefit he received from it; but rather for the good it did them in providing an opportunity to express their Christian love and concern for him. Paul understood that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Those who give freely, generously – even sacrificially – because of their love in Christ Jesus are, in a small way, doing exactly what Christ did and continues to do. In that sense they are sharing in his giving and proving themselves to be a part of the body of Christ, the individual members taking care of each other as the need arises. And that really is worth rejoicing over.

And then, based on everything he's said leading up to this point, Paul finally gets to the secret of contentment: it's not about having things or not. It's not about success or failure. It's not about comfort or the lack of it. It's about knowing the Lord Jesus Christ and what he has done, as well as what he has promised yet to do. This is where – or rather in whom – Paul finds his strength, his hope, and his confidence to endure whatever may happen to him. Paul knows to whom he belongs. He knows what that means for him both in this life and in the next. Paul knows that he cannot lose – that in Christ he has already won the victory. How could he be anything less than content with that?

Indeed, how could we? May God in his mercy grant us the same grace he gave to Paul to know and to live by the secret of finding contentment in every circumstance. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!