

Sophie Tucker, the vaudeville singer, once said famously about her life, "I've been rich and I've been poor – and believe me, rich is better." St. Paul says something a little different at the end of his Letter to the Philippians. His message is, "I've been rich and I've been poor – and believe me, neither one is better."

Saint Paul had visited the people of Philippi and endured his share of hardships while he was there, but somehow he made very good friends with this community. His letter to them shimmers with affection. Paul shouldn't have had favorites, but he really felt attracted to the Philippians. And the feeling was mutual. After Paul left there, he continued his missionary journeys into Macedonia, where he fell on some hard times. As word spread, he received financial support from various churches, including the Philippians. In fact, they took up two collections for him. One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was to acknowledge this gift. He could have said more plainly, "Thank you," but he doesn't, and it may be that he has another message to deliver; namely, "I've been rich and I've been poor and neither one is better." Here's what he says: "I know how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need." It sounds like an autobiography, but he tells this story not to draw attention to himself, but to teach the Philippians about life. Paul has endured the worst and the best that life has to offer, and he expresses no preference. Instead, he makes this boast: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." Christ gives Paul all the strength he needs, and Paul has access to this strength in all the good and bad circumstances of life. He's basically telling the Philippians, "Look, thanks for your gift, but I really didn't need it. I'll take it. I'll use it. It will make life more comfortable. But I can find Christ in poverty as well as in abundance." He says the reason he took the gift is that he knows the value of giving, that their act of giving will help them. He takes it for their sakes, not for his own. He could live without it.

In our society this is a difficult philosophy to adopt. Sophie Tucker had a point. Poverty is no fun. The economic crisis in our country has hit many retired persons especially hard. No one wants to think about losing in a week what took years to save. We have an obligation to help the needy. This year the Catholic bishops of America said, "those who are in greatest need deserve preferential concern. A moral test of society is how we treat the weakest among us – the unborn, those dealing with disabilities or terminal illness, the poor and marginalized." It is tempting to think that being rich will make us happy, and that the present economic woes of our country will bring nothing but sorrow. But Saint Paul teaches a different lesson. One the one hand, giving benefits the giver; on the other hand, if you have linked your faith in Christ to your experience of abundance, then you haven't really gotten to know him yet. You can be happy whether you are rich or poor, in gain or in loss, as long as you have Christ.