**Philippians 4:4-8** November 5, 2017

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*Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Letters. Do you remember those? Maybe you still have an aunt or grandma who writes a letter every once in a great while. Up until about fifteen or twenty years ago, when calling by telephone was pretty expensive, people often wrote letters. When email came along, we all wondered whether people would continue to write letters or not. Guess not. The younger among us have perhaps never gotten an actual letter, and almost certainly never written a letter. Oh sure, you write the occasional thank you note, but not a real two or three pager.

I still have a folder of letters that I keep. Not all of them; just the best and happiest. Included are more than one letter last letter written to me before they left this world. When you read those letters you can tell a lot about the people who wrote them and the people who received them. They are emotionally rich.

Did you know that most of the “books” of the New Testament were actually letters. We call them epistles, which is the Greek word for “letters.” We read these words of God, called Epistles, for our spiritual strengthening. Like some of the old letters we might have, but in a much greater way, these ancient letters are treasure troves of God’s wisdom.

Of the thirteen Holy Spirit inspired letters that Paul wrote, this letter to the Christians in Philippi was his most joyful. There were no high profile opponents to his apostolic ministry in Philippi—as in some places. There were no major un-Christian teachings infiltrating the church in Philippi. This letter is called his letter of joy. It is a letter of encouragement to people who honored Jesus as their Savior, God’s Word as their guide, and Paul as their pastor. Paul wrote so that they would *continue* to be the joy of his heart. May it so be today.

In these closing verses of Paul’s letter, the high point of the letter, the “Go get ‘em” of the locker room pep talk, Paul tells Christians how to keep their Christian joy in this fallen world. He says to them, ***“Rejoice… Let your gentleness be evident… Do not be anxious…Think about such things.”***

**I. Rejoice**

He tells them, ***“Rejoice!”*** “Rejoice” is not just a church word. Rejoicing isn’t just what we do when we come to church and sing a rollicking verse of “*To God Be the Glory; great things he has done…”* “Rejoice” is also what we do when a new baby is born into the family, when word comes down of a promotion in rank or raise in pay. We rejoice at the time of the wedding—the happiness we feel deep in our hearts for two soul-mates who have found each other and pledged to share their lives together. That more than happy feeling, that joyful feeling is what Paul tells us to do. This joy is the same thing the shunned Zacchaeus felt when Israel’s most popular man stepped over the threshold of his house to break bread with him. Rejoicing is what the prodigal’s father felt when his son appeared around the bend on the path back to the homestead.

But Paul complicates the issue. Paul says, ***“Rejoice always.”*** It’s easy to rejoice with the new baby and the promotion. But how about when my retirement nest egg loses 40% of its value—six months before my planned retirement? Paul says, ***“Rejoice, always.”*** When my spouse of 37 years passes from this world, leaving me with no one who really understands? ***“Rejoice, always.”*** Rejoice when neighbors and community turn on me? ***“Rejoice, always.”*** Paul, what kind of psychopath are you? Warm fuzzies have their place, but they also *don’t* have their place.

***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”*** Paul keeps beating the drum. Should we plug our ears? Should we shoot the drummer?

One time Jesus’ apostles were imprisoned. One by one they were summoned out of the cell. The guards bared their backs and then opened their flesh with the lashes of the whip. The apostles were given their clothes back and told to go home and shut up. Do you know what they did? *“They left rejoicing.”* *“They left rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus.]”* (Acts 5:41). They knew the secret to rejoicing – being in the Lord.

The only way that we can rejoice always is to ***“rejoice in the Lord.”*** We do not rejoice over bad things that happen, and Paul doesn’t tell us to. He invites us to look beyond the bad *and the good* to rejoice ***“in the Lord.”*** We rejoice in faith, faith in the unchangeableness of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. No one, nothing, can take the treasures Christ has won for us. We may weep for an evening, even a decade, but our joyful feast in heaven will last forever, literally. Godly rejoicing is faith that even the bad things that happen will be used by God. Godly rejoicing sings, *“Let us suffer here with Jesus, To his image e'er conform; Heaven's glory soon will please us, Sunshine follow on the storm..”* (*CW* 452:2)

**II. Be Considerate**

If “Rejoicing” is how we are to react to the world, then the next directive is how we are to interact with the world: ***“Let your gentleness be evident to all.”*** The original Greek word behind “gentleness” is a tough word. The English doesn’t have a counterpart for the Greek word. Gentleness sometimes implies weakness. Also, gentleness is mostly an internal thing. This word is not about weakness or something merely internal. Perhaps “be considerate, be accepting” is better.

Here we have no better example than Jesus himself. Think of Jesus with the children, who looked at them as children and drew them close to do something more substantial than hug them, he blessed them. Think of how Jesus first appeared to the cowardly disciples who had abandoned him, and he told them, “Do not fear.” Think of how Jesus looked up in that fig tree and seeing Zacchaeus said, “I must eat at your house today.” Accept people.

Jesus has accepted you and me for who we are and forgiven us. (That is an important thing that we must never forget. Jesus did not merely tell us “You’re good.” He said, “You’re filthy” and then he washed us up, forgave our sins that would damn us to hell and then said, “You’re good.”)

Do that! Reflect Christ’s forgiving gentleness and consideration. You are God’s light to many people around you who have no other light. Accept where people are as the starting point, and draw them closer to their Savior.

***“Let your gentleness be evident to all.”***

**III. Pray**

The third thing Paul tells the Philippians so that they may continue to be the joy of his life is, ***“Do not be anxious about anything.”***

Yah, right! We worry about things. And when we get worry number one crossed off the list—which doesn’t happen often—but when it does, do you know what we do? Instead of getting a shorter list, we find something else to worry about! While we think that other people have so much less stress in their lives, the truth is that poor people have just as many worries as the rich. The popular have as many as the unpopular. The young as the old. It is almost as natural to worry as it is to breathe.

Do you know what? Worry is sin. It is sin because worry is a lack of trust in God. And you are going to say, “But I can’t help my anxiety and worry.” Me either! While anxiety is understandable and natural, it is still a sign our sinful nature and our need for forgiveness.

God’s word in our reading tells us how to zero-out the worry-meter, ***“In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*** The way we get rid of anxiety is to pray. Take your concerns—always offered with thanksgiving—and place them in God’s hands.

That is faith. We still make plans. We still think about how to deal with issues. We do what God has given us the ability to do. And we commit our actions to God, and we trust him for the result.

**IV. Think about Good Things**

Now our time runs late and we have not much time to examine some words that we should all think of more often: ***“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”*** (8).

Is it possible to only think about or listen to good things? Take your Bible for instance. I couldn’t come up with the quotation, but I remember once hearing of a woman who over a hundred years ago refused to read the Bible to her children. “Why, let them listen to that book full of adulterers, murderers and thieves!” She had a point, didn’t she! If you take her view, the Bible probably would be PG-13 if not rated R. But here is the difference. The Bible portrays much wickedness but it clearly portrays it as wickedness. It shows much sin, and sinners as deserving God’s punishment.

That is the danger, I fear, of much of our entertainment. It may or may not be the subject matter *per se*, but how much of our entertainment glamorizes the dark, encourages us to enjoy (if only in mind) the immoral, to blur the lines of God’s justice.

Nearly two years ago Lisa and I went to a high school forensics meet. There are many different classifications like debate and poetry, etc. We were audience to two person mini-plays. We saw perhaps a dozen different skits. What was striking was how seedy all of them were—and this was high school! They dwelt on and drew you into dark worlds of affairs and drugs and suicide and I don’t remember what else. I was shocked. Of all the plays, there was one which stood out, not like a sore thumb, but a lonely rose on a corpse-strewn battlefield. I said to Lisa, “All the rest celebrate the bad of life, this is the only one that celebrates the beauty of life.” And an unknown woman next to me overheard the comment and nodded agreement with her whole body.

We, in our choices of what we fill our minds with need to be conscious of our choices. Each Christian decide for themselves. But as Children of the Light, we do well to remember these words: to paste them to the corner of the TV, to make them the screensaver on the computer, to—I don’t know where you post it on a cellphone—to constantly remind ourselves, ***“If anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”*** That is why I, as your pastor, continually encourage you to make time for God’s Word in your daily life. There are good and beautiful things in life. But only God’s Word tells you without fail what is excellent and praiseworthy.

So the apostolic advice to us to stop being sad, angry, worried people is to rejoice in the Lord, to be considerate and gentle to all, to pray and to fill our minds with things that please God. If you do these things, God’s Word promises, ***“The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (7)

I didn’t tell you one thing about this letter. This chipper letter to be joyful always, to not worry, do you know the return address on the envelope? It was a prison in Rome. For four years Paul had been wrongfully imprisoned. This is the man who teaches us to be joyful, considerate and trusting.

He was living out some of Jesus’ very last words to his disciples. Jesus said, *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33). Amen.