

4 - REJOICE IN THE LORD

Philippians 4:1-23

Key Verse: 4:4

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"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

In Chapter 1 we learned that Paul wrote this joyful letter from prison. As he faced his uncertain future he wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." In chapter 2 he turned his eyes to Jesus, who humbled himself and was obedient even to death on the cross, and he wrote, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." In chapter 3, he gave his personal testimony. He regarded his human achievements and impeccable background as rubbish for the supreme worth of gaining Christ. He wrote, "I want to know Christ," and he told us that to know Jesus we must love his cross. In this last chapter of Philippians Paul applies gospel faith to some practical problems. First, he urges two powerful and faithful women to settle the problem between them. Second, he tells us what the inner thought world of the believer should be like; third, he thanks the Philippian believers for the gifts they sent him--and teaches that Christians must give in order to please God. Paul shares the secret of victory in all of these sensitive and difficult areas. Let's learn to say with Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (13)

1. Agree with each other in the Lord (1-3)

First, agree with each other. (2-3) Read verse 2. "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." Paul doesn't discuss the problem between Euodia and Syntyche, but whatever it was, the problem itself didn't matter; the restoration of fellowship between believers did. They must agree with each other in the Lord. Broken relationships are the devil's opportunity to destroy the work of God. If the vessel of the Holy Spirit is cracked, God's work is greatly limited. A broken home means broken-hearted children.

Second, "Help these women." Read verse 3. "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." These two powerful women were fellow workers who had contended at Paul's side in the cause of the gospel. Their names were written in the book of life. But some disagreement had arisen between them. They must not contend with one another; they should fight the devil. Perhaps they thought that their disagreement was a private matter. But it was not a private matter. So Paul asked his "loyal yokefellow"--perhaps the one who told him about this matter--to interfere. It's not easy to stick one's nose into another's business. Perhaps Paul's co-worker had tried to keep out of it. It's easier and safer to say, "That's their problem." But broken relationships affect the whole body of believers. So Paul urged them to agree in the Lord, and he encouraged a responsible shepherd in Philippi to make this matter his business. It's not easy to restore broken relationships. But it can be done "in the Lord." One keynote of this chapter is, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Is there someone with whom you can't get along? The Bible says, "Agree with each other

in the Lord." Does your sheep or child or co-worker have a grudge against someone else? Perhaps you should pray about it and interfere, and help him or her to let Jesus solve the problem. Interfering to help another solve a relationship problem is a thankless job, and could get one into trouble. But we must learn to say with Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

2. Rejoice in the Lord always (4-9)

Paul comes back to the major theme of this letter--rejoice. In verses 4-9 he gives us some practical directions about how we can have Christ's joy in our hearts always.

First, let your gentleness be evident to all. Read verse 5. "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." "Gentleness" is also translated as "forbearance." It is very close to humbleness. The reason for being forbearing and not overbearing is, "The Lord is near." He could come in glory with his holy angels at any time. Even if he delays his second coming, still he is near. The two women who were struggling with each other each needed to learn the gentleness of Christ. Perhaps they needed to spend some more time with him. We don't need to insist on our own way nor do we need to win every argument. Sometimes when we insist on our own way and win, joy leaves our hearts. We win an argument and lose a friend--or a sheep. We can be patient and gentle when we take time to be with Jesus. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Second, don't be anxious--pray--and be thankful. Read verse 6. "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." Jesus once rebuked Martha for being anxious about many things. She was busy trying to serve him and his disciples, and she complained about Mary, who was listening to Jesus' words instead of helping her. Even if we have too many things to do and too little time to do them, busy-minded activity doesn't solve the problem. Anxiety doesn't solve any problem. Prayer with thanksgiving does, because when we pray and ask God's help, he answers. He may not solve the problem in the way we would like him to, but we may be sure that his way is best. He gives us his peace in exchange for our anxiety. When Abraham was full of fear and a sense of loss, he prayed. God showed him the stars and gave him a wonderful promise. He believed that promise and the peace of God ruled his heart. When the peace of God which transcends all understanding guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, we have joy that no one can take away.

Third, think about these things. (8) Paul tells believers what they should think about. Read verse 8. (Believe it or not, this is Northwestern U.'s motto.) "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." When one's mind and heart are full of dirt and junk, one can't be joyful, and one can't please God. Let's think about these things for a moment.

1st, "whatever is true." The devil is a liar who hates truth. (Jn 8) We live in a world dominated by relativism. Some people think that there is no truth. But as surely as there is a Creator God, there is truth. Moral relativism will put a person in hell. Jesus told his disciples, "I am the way and the truth and the life." (Jn 14:6) He told Pilate, "...I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." (Jn 18:37) Paul challenges believers to let King Jesus rule the thought world.

2nd, "whatever is noble." Honor, duty, loyalty, respect are a few noble things. Broken promises, neglected duty, selfishness, laziness, etc., are ignoble.

3rd, "whatever is right." This is sometimes translated, "what ever is just." When revenge rules the heart, justice flees. Forgiveness is right because it is Jesus' command. It's easy to think about how we have been wronged, and hard to think about how we may have wronged others. I must think about what is right, not about what is beneficial to me.

4th, "whatever is pure." How hard it is to keep our thoughts pure when we are bombarded through the media and all kinds of advertising by ugly and debasing exploitation of sex and all kinds of violence. These things strike a chord in our sinful natures and occupy our minds. But if we read the Bible, pray and hide God's word in our hearts, God will cleanse our minds. Jesus said, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." (Jn 15:3) The Psalmist said, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Ps 119:11) He also tells us to meditate on God's word day and night and become like fruitful trees planted by streams of water (Ps 1). Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse our dirty hearts and make us pure.

5th, "whatever is lovely." Once, art and music sought to express what is lovely and beautiful. These days, the art and music of despair have captured the fine arts, so that they express what is ugly and degrading. We must pray that Christ may capture the fine arts so that they may again help people to appreciate what is beautiful and lovely.

6th, "whatever is admirable." This is sometimes translated, "of good report." It is unnecessary for God's people to gossip or to listen to gossip. We should have no part in spreading bad reports about others. Instead, we should pray for one another.

7th, "if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things." Some people say, "What I think is my own business," and they think that to interfere with a person's thought world is an invasion of privacy, or some kind of mind control.

But from the beginning, our Creator God has been concerned about what we think. In Genesis 6:5-6 he said, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved..."

Romans 8:5,6 says, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace." Paul says in 2Co 10:5b, "...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." In Colossians 3:1,2 he says, "...set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things..."

What we think about is very important. It is a matter of life or death. This is why pornography and movies filled with sex and violence are degrading and dehumanizing--to adults as well as to children. So, let's think about what is true, what is noble, what is right, what is pure, what is lovely and what is admirable, excellent or praiseworthy. In a world ruled by the devil, the ruler of this world, there is no way to do this unless we invite Jesus to come into our hearts and minds and rule. We don't need to surrender our thought worlds to the devil. In Christ, we can do all things. If Jesus is not in our hearts, then ignoble, false, ugly, and degrading things come in and rule our hearts. What is in our thought world

will surely spill over into our lives and actions at some time. This is why some Christian leaders who started out with a sincere desire to serve God have fallen into sin. The downward plunge starts with surrendering our thought world to the devil--allowing our minds to drift into thinking the idle or useless thoughts dictated by our sinful nature. Let's read verse 8 again. Let's think about such things. Some people think that they can't control what goes on in their minds. But Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Fourth, put it into practice. (9) Read verse 9. "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." God spoke through Paul to write two-thirds of the New Testament. We must study the Bible and learn its content--but that's not enough; we must pray and strive to put it into practice. (See Mt 7:24,26.) There is a promise here in verse 9: "The God of peace will be with you." When we meditate on God's word and seek to obey him, the God of peace gives us his peace and his presence.

3. I have learned the secret of being content (10-13)

This part of chapter 4 is Paul's thank-you letter to the Philippians for the gifts they have sent him through Epaphroditus. Here we find Paul's attitude toward giving and receiving. We must learn from him.

First, the giver is more important than the gift. Read verse 10. "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it." Paul rejoices in the Lord that their concern for him and for God's work has been renewed. He values their friendship and wants to see their active participation in gospel work.

Second, I am content. Read verse 11. "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." This means that Paul is free from bondage to material things. To be content doesn't mean to lose one's ambition. It means that one accepts with gratitude the life God has given him to live. He does not envy anyone or want to change places with anybody.

Third, Paul's source of strength. He shares with them the secret of his contentment and his source of strength. Read verses 12-13. "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Paul did not try to live a Christian life in his own strength. He drew his strength from Jesus. We also can find strength in Jesus to rejoice "in the Lord always"; we can find strength in Jesus to forgive, and strength to love. We can find strength to overcome times of want, and strength to overcome the temptations of abundance; in Christ Jesus our minds and hearts are guarded by the peace of God. No problem is too big for Jesus and no problem too small. We must learn to turn to Jesus in every circumstance and ask his help and guidance. We must be humble enough to learn to depend on him, not on ourselves. This was Paul's secret of victory. "I can do all things through him who gives me strength."

4. An acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God (14-23)

Paul thanked the Philippians for the gift they had sent him through Epaphroditus. He said in verse 14, "Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles." Then he goes on to teach them why Christians must give.

First, to participate in God's work. Paul remembered how the church in Philippi had shared in his gospel ministry through their giving in the past. Read verses 15-16: "Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need." The Philippian Christians had been a giving church from the beginning. They were not selfish; they had world mission vision. So they prayed for Paul and sent him aid again and again when he was in need.

Second, it is pleasing to God. Read verses 17-18. "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." Paul was grateful for the gifts the Philippians sent, for they supplied his needs. But he wanted them to understand that giving is a spiritual exercise that always benefits the one who gives more than the one who receives. Acts 20:35b says, "Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

We have received grace from God that we can never repay. He gave his one and only Son to die on the cross so that we might be forgiven. We can never repay the debt we owe him. He saved us so that we might live unselfish lives, serving God and our fellow man. A benefit-seeking Christian is not really a Christian, for he is evidently not aware of God's grace in his life. As God's people, we must be people who give to others. If our faith does not touch our pocketbooks, then it does not really touch our hearts or our lives. Paul said, "(Your gifts) are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." We give, not by calculating what we can afford or what another needs. We give as an act of worship to God.

Third, God supplies the needs of those who give from the heart. Read verse 19. "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Jesus taught us in Matthew 6 not to be anxious about material things--what we eat or drink. He said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mt 6:33)

In this last lecture in Philippians we have learned what it means to be "in Christ." May God help us allow Jesus to rule our relationships and our thought lives and our pocketbooks. Then we can be joyful in all circumstances and we can say with Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."