

Rejoicing with Contentment

Proper 23

Pastor Josh Frazee

Phil. 4:4-13

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you anxious? Anxiety is a “distress or uneasiness of mind caused by fear of danger or misfortune (dictionary.com).” But to what time does anxiety apply?

Are you anxious about what’s happening right at this particular moment? Or does anxiety apply to what may or will happen in the future? Unless the thing about which you are worrying is currently happening to you, your fears are more concerned with what may or will happen in the future.

It is true that each of us can probably think of at least one area in our lives where we are having a disagreement—be it minor or major—with someone else, or maybe a few others.

That’s what’s happening just before our epistle text. Paul entreats a couple of women who are having a disagreement with one another to “agree in the Lord.” Paul then asks a “true companion” to assist with this process—presumably one well known to the Philippians and perhaps the one who would be receiving this letter to read or disperse to the rest of those at Philippi.

This dispute must have been well known to those in Philippi for Paul to single it out in his letter that would be heard by all. Yet Paul does not write much about the dispute—just enough to show that he was aware of the disagreement. Instead, he writes to these ladies to rejoice in the Lord. He will encourage them not to be anxious but instead to remember that their future—like ours—is completely in God’s hands, which is a joyful truth in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Verse 1

Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not 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 surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Paul writes to the women having the dispute—and to the rest of the believers at Philippi—not to be anxious. Instead, they should remember that the “Lord is at hand.” Too often we consider the phrase “the Lord is at hand” with fear and trepidation. Probably with some apprehension.

There is good reason to be apprehensive about the Lord’s coming—His Second Coming to which this phrase directs our thoughts. Jesus will be coming to judge. For those who do not believe, the future brings hell—punishment so bad we don’t even have a point of comparison for it. It is complete and utter separation from God and from any love or any other good thing. No one—save Christ Himself—has suffered this here on earth, and we don’t want to.

Obviously this is not what Paul wanted those hearing his letter to be thinking about by including that phrase. And that isn’t what believers consider when they contemplate Christ’s return. Believers think about joy when they think about Christ’s Second Coming. They think of the joy of being with God for all eternity—with our body and soul made perfect so that we no longer sin or desire to sin. It is this joy and this joyful future to which Paul directed those women. It is the joy we have because Jesus has paid the price for our sins. Our punishment has been paid and we now have the peace of God.

Verse 2

So Paul continues: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Paul encourages the Philippians—and us—to focus on Godly things. We are to contemplate those things which are true. The truth is given to us by divine revelation in the Word. Without agreement on this fact, there will be no unity among us. About the truth of God’s Word, the commentator for the ESV Study Bible wrote that “When truth is a matter of human opinion rather than divine revelation, people will have their own version (2 Tim. 3:7).”

Rejoicing with the truth of God’s Word, then, Paul implores us to ponder on these virtues: honor, justice, purity, loveliness, things which are commendable, things which are excellent, and anything worthy of praise. He has in mind that we meditate on them. Like Mary pondering and meditating on the events of her life after she had given birth to the baby Jesus, we keep these things at the forefront of our minds. Luther put it this way in the Large Catechism: “[The Word] always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devoutness and produces a pure heart and pure thoughts (LC I 101).”

Bear in mind that this is the same Luther who had thought of God as a mean taskmaster. Prior to his learning the truth that salvation is the free gift of God, Luther had derived no joy from God’s Word. Instead, he felt beaten down by it. He felt that he had to do all that God demanded or that he was going to go to hell. Yet Luther found that what Jesus and God commanded were not things for him to do. All he had to do was repent and believe that he was forgiven and God would be the one to change his heart. Even though this happened before he found the passage about faith being the free gift of God, this idea would have brought him much joy. God didn’t expect him to change himself through penance or actions of his own; God would do the work of changing his heart and mind and soul—just as Luther wrote He would through His Word in that text from the Large Catechism. Again, “[The Word] always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devoutness and produces a pure heart and pure thoughts (LC I 101).”

God works the same way in us, and in Paul, who had also found the joy of the Lord even in the most unlikely of places, as we hear at the end of our text.

Verse 3

“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. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

The joy that we have received in Christ gives us the strength we need for all situations. Paul lists several in which he himself has learned to cope. He wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians that he has borne his apostleship “with far greater labors (than others), far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times (he received) at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times (he) was beaten with rods. Once (he) was stoned. Three times (he) was shipwrecked; a night and a day (he) was adrift at sea; (he was) on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from (his) own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers,

in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there (was) the daily pressure on (him) of (his) anxiety for all the churches.”

So Paul most certainly knew how to be brought low and how to be humbled. And those at Philippi—though they did not receive this full list—knew Paul had suffered, and was continuing to suffer, for the sake of the Gospel. Paul was in prison as he wrote this letter to them. Yet instead of asking them to get him out, he wrote to them, and even to the disputing women, to find the joy of the Gospel, the same joy he had found in the Gospel and that Luther later also found in it.

If you are going through a dispute right now, or if you have any anxiety, consider Paul’s words to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” You do not have to earn God’s favor. God sent His Son Jesus to die for your sins, and for His sake forgives you all of your sins. And as you meditate and ponder on His Word and the joy that you have in that Gospel, God will give you a pure heart and “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” In Jesus’ Name. Amen.