

The Joy of Peace

Philippians 4:1-9

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This has certainly been a sobering week around the world; and probably what would characterize many, if not most, would be a certain sense of anxiety and fear. I realize there are people who oppose this war on the basis of principle. I understand that; I respect that. But I think much of the rhetoric is driven by fear.

There was a UNL professor on the radio several weeks ago talking about students in his class who wanted to go to the Capitol and protest the war. He gave them permission to miss class to do that as long as they wrote back a report explaining the reasons why they wanted to protest the war. He said as he read through their paper he was saddened—for one reason, because their arguments were so silly. But mostly he said he was saddened because these young people are driven by fear.

I think the rhetoric on both sides, by and large, is driven by fear, because that's where people are at right now. There is a lot to be afraid of. But the question is: Do we have to live that way? Do we have to live with fear and anxiety? The answer is no. No, we can do better. And Paul tells us how in Philippians chapter 4.

Paul opens Philippians 4 with the word “therefore” in verse one, and we talked about the fact that whenever you see that word you need to go back into the text and figure out what has preceded the discussion. Paul has been talking about what it means to be a citizen of heaven. In the last couple of verses he said we are citizens of heaven, looking for the return of Christ and having this power within us that is making us into what God wants us to be. Because all of that is true, *therefore* he gives the following discussion.

Verse 1: “Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.” Paul is telling the believers in Philippi, and us as well, that what he is going to say is based on the truth that we have studied (“therefore”). He's talking about what we believe to be true in terms of who we are as citizens of heaven. We are no longer citizens of earth. We are no longer simply natural—what we can do in our flesh—but now we have a supernatural dimension in what God is doing in and through us. Therefore, we ought to live like it, which is then the admonition to stand firm.

Paul talked about being a citizen in chapter one, verse 27, when he said, “Conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel.” That word for “conduct” is the word for citizen. Also in that verse he said, “Stand firm.” But if you look at the text, it is not just stand firm, it is “stand firm *in the Lord*.” That's not a cliché; that's filled with all kinds of theological meaning. We are to stand firm because of who we are in Christ, because of who God is, and because of what He's doing within us. It is, then, because of this supernatural element “in the Lord” that we stand firm.

One way of thinking about it would be that those who do not know Christ are what we would call “natural.” They are citizens of earth; they simply do what they can do in their own power. But that is contrasted with those who have the life-changing power of God within them who are now citizens of heaven. Therefore they are the supernatural versus the natural.

In the process of this opening discussion, Paul reminds the believers that he longs to see them and he refers to them as his “joy” and his “crown.” Most of this book has been about joy—about behavior that ultimately results in joy. He reminds us that his joy is not in his things, his possessions. He told us in chapter 1 that his joy was in people—that looking at what was happening in their lives was an indication that they had truly embraced the gospel. “Therefore,” he said, “I am thrilled. I rejoice! Because I know He who started this work will be faithful to complete it.” Paul knows for a fact they will one day stand before the Judge and be crowned as champions of grace. Therefore, when he thinks about these people, he says they are his source of joy. They are his crown, which might be better translated “wreath.” He’s referring to the athletic wreath that went on the head of the champion when he stood before the judge.

So Paul is thinking about these people and what they are becoming, and he’s celebrating that. But in the process of thinking about it, he says, “Stand firm.” In other words, “Then live like it. Let’s live like what we’re becoming.”

I think the verses that follow, then, are characteristics of a citizen of heaven. In a sense, we can go through them as kind of a checklist and ask ourselves, *Are we really living like citizens of heaven? Are we living consistent with what we say we believe?* Another way of looking at it is to see it as a contrast between the natural man and the supernatural man: those who are citizens of *earth* versus those who are citizens of *heaven*.

The first characteristic of a citizen of heaven is found in verses 2 and 3. This is the theme Paul has talked about a lot in this letter: that a citizen of heaven has a commitment to unity. There must be a commitment to the unity of the body in order to accomplish the mission, which is the advancement of the gospel.

To make this point, he addresses two women in the church who weren’t getting along. Verse 2: “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.” Again, this phrase “in the Lord” is not a cliché. It’s filled with all kinds of theological meaning. We’ve talked about this before—that we believe when we trust Christ as Savior the very Spirit of Jesus comes and dwells within us. Therefore, if you are a believer in Christ you have the Spirit of Jesus within you. I have the Spirit of Jesus within me. It is reasonable to expect that the Spirit of Jesus would be in harmony with Himself; therefore, the outflow of our theology would have to be unity. How could the Spirit of Jesus not get along with Himself?

Therefore, whenever there is disunity or disharmony it can only be attributed to the fact that someone is walking according to the flesh, because there is no way that the Spirit of Jesus is going to be in conflict with the Spirit of Jesus. So we must do everything in our power to reconcile relationships and maintain unity. That’s a big part of our theology that gives our message credibility in order to advance the gospel.

In this case there were two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who were not getting along. They were out of harmony. And Paul tells us in verse 3 that these were not women out on the periphery. These were women who were key players in the church; they were a significant part of his mission of advancing the gospel. But whatever had happened, they were not getting along. They had dug their heels in and they were divided. As a matter of fact, a lot of commentators think that just the fact that Paul used the words “I urge you” twice (“I urge Euodia; I urge Syntyche”) is a way of saying they wouldn’t even talk to each other. It’s like he had to say it specifically to both of them to get the message out.

We understand the importance of unity. The question is usually: How? How do we do this? Paul answered that in Philippians chapter 2 when he said we are to do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit (which is our pride) but with humility of mind think of others as more important than ourselves. That's the key. It was modeled by the attitude of Jesus, who left the glories of heaven in order to come to this earth to be nailed to a cross for your sin and mine.

Now think about the unfairness of that. Oftentimes when we are out of harmony, what drives that conflict is a feeling that we've been hurt or mistreated or treated unfairly. We feel a certain sense of justice in digging our heels in and saying, "It's not my fault." In other words, what we are saying is, "It's not fair." But we need to understand that, in order to really be committed to unity, it isn't about fairness. It isn't about whether or not I've been hurt. It's about thinking of others as more important than myself. It is modeling the attitude of Jesus, who was treated more unfairly than anyone ever has been. It's about understanding the need to die to myself. One might say it's to take a hit for the team in order to accomplish the mission.

Our girls go to Norris School, and last weekend the boys' team was in the state basketball playoffs. In the Friday game something very interesting happened. In the third quarter they were behind by 16 points, and there was about 4 minutes to go. One of the players from Norris, Mike, basically just took over the game, and by the end of that third quarter Norris was ahead. It was wild. It was tense. It was frantic. In the process of all that activity and frenzy, the ball was over on the side court and the referees were both looking at that, when one of the opponents, right in the middle of the lane, simply doubled up his fist and slugged Mike right in the face. The referees didn't see it, but the coach saw it, and when the ball went out of bounds he brought it to their attention. But at that split second Mike had a choice to make. He could fight back, and he would have been kicked out of the game, and that would have been the end of Norris' chance. But instead, he exercised, in my opinion, incredible self-restraint and just poured his energy into basketball, and they won the game.

Now as I went through this particular text, I thought about that. If an 18 year-old young man can exercise that kind of restraint just to win a basketball game, how much restraint should we be willing to offer for something that has eternal consequences? He was willing to take one for the team. And yet so often we're unwilling to do the same, with the very power of Christ working through us. We are called to an all-out commitment to unity for the sake of the mission.

The reality is, though, sometimes people just dig their heels in and are unwilling to budge. And at that point, it is the responsibility of the church body to come alongside and do whatever we can to bring these people together in unity. That's verse 3: "Indeed, true comrade..." There's a lot of discussion about this Greek word that's translated "true comrade." Some people think it was someone's name, but that seems unlikely to me. It could be translated "yoke fellow" instead of true comrade, and I think that's probably better. I think Paul is referring to the church collectively as a body and the fact that we are yoke fellows, which means we're both in the same yoke and we're pulling together to accomplish the mission. Because of that, we need to be in harmony, so he is appealing to us as fellow teammates.

"...I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." Paul calls upon the church to help. He tells them to do whatever they can to

reconcile these two ladies together. Then again, he bases this on theology, because all of our names are written in the book of life. In other words, we are going to spend eternity together. If we are going to get along for eternity, can't we as citizens of heaven get along here on the earth?

Sometimes we're tempted to go down the path, *Well, then, I'm not even sure that other person is a Christian*. Don't even go there. *You* are a Christian, and you have *your* responsibility to do whatever you can to try and reconcile this.

If somebody comes to you and they have a grief about somebody else, your responsibility is not to nurse that. Your responsibility is to stop them by saying, "I don't need to hear that. If you have a problem with so-and-so, you need to go to that person; and you need to do whatever you have to do to work that out. If I need to come along and help, I'm happy to do that." That is the responsibility of every member of the body. Just imagine how radically that would change our church family if every time someone wanted to talk poorly about someone else, it was just stopped by saying, "Sorry, I can't hear that. If you have a problem, then you go to that person and you do whatever you can to work that out. If you need me to come along and help, I will do that." That is our responsibility together as a body, to foster unity and not disunity for the sake of the gospel.

The second characteristic of a citizen of heaven is found in verse 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always..." It is talking about someone who rejoices *always*—not sometimes, not once in awhile, but always. It's a way of life. Again, the phrase "in the Lord" is filled with all this theological meaning that's very important. I don't rejoice because everything is going well. I don't rejoice because I don't have any problems in life. I don't rejoice because everything in my life is in order. I rejoice *always* because of what I know is true...because I am in the Lord...because of who God is and what He's doing in my life and where I'm headed. Sometimes even in the most difficult circumstances—*often* in the most difficult—it's then that we really understand what's important and what's true. It's in those moments that we rejoice.

In my opinion, if there is anyone in this church body who has reason to be angry and bitter, it would be Bruce Batterman, because of all he's gone through with brain surgeries and procedures and medications. His journey has been very, very hard. And yet, when you see this guy he absolutely radiates the joy of Christ! All you have to do is look at him—he's just alive with the joy of Christ. You say, "Man, that's not natural." No, it's not. It is supernatural. That's the presence of Christ in his life. What's natural is that we dig in our ground and we create disunity because we've been hurt. What's natural is that we grumble. What's *supernatural* is that we die to ourselves for the sake of unity. What's *supernatural* is that we rejoice always, even in the midst of very difficult circumstances, because of what we know and believe to be true.

The third characteristic is found in verse 5: "Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near." A citizen of heaven has a forbearing spirit. A forbearing spirit is a spirit that is filled with grace. It's a gracious spirit that returns favor to someone who doesn't deserve it. We need to understand that, as the church of Jesus Christ, we're not about fairness. We're not about justice. We're about grace first and foremost. It is on the basis of grace that we are the church, and we are to have a gracious spirit.

The Old Testament Scriptures were written in Hebrew, but there was also a Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is called the Septuagint. It's very helpful to find

which Greek words correlate exactly with which Hebrew words. In Psalm 86:5 God is described as a God who stands ready to forgive. The Greek word that is used to describe that is this Greek word. That's ultimately what it means. To have a forbearing spirit means I stand ready to forgive. That's really hard; I understand that. But I understand, too, that sometimes we lose perspective. Sometimes we start thinking about somebody's sin as worse than our sin, and we start making all these categories.

Let's remember some facts here. Let's remember that if nobody ever sinned except just you, your sin put Jesus on the cross. Don't ever forget that: your sin put Jesus on the cross. Before you start pointing fingers at somebody else, remember that it was you who put Him on that cross. Let's never forget the fact that your sin was so offensive to God that He condemned you to hell forever, because He could not tolerate you in His presence. That's true of every single one of us. And it's only on the basis of God's grace that you and I have been forgiven and can stand in His presence.

Because that is true, the Bible says we have been forgiven so much that God then calls us to forgive others. Matthew 18 and other passages basically lay out this as the theological basis behind the command to be a forgiving person. And I don't see any conditions with this. It doesn't say to let your forbearing spirit be known to some people. It says to *all* men. It doesn't even qualify it as just believers. It says all men—everybody—all people. We are to have a spirit of forgiveness, whether or not they are sorry, whether or not they repent, whether or not they care at all. Forgiveness is about you being set free from what somebody else has done to you. So as a citizen of heaven, understanding how we have been forgiven, we are then called to extend the same to others.

He says at the end of verse 5, "The Lord is near." That was a statement they often said in the New Testament church, which was just a reminder that Jesus is coming. It's a reminder that we're in a battle, we're in the trenches, and He is coming! So let's do what's right. There's a sense of urgency to obeying His commands. It's as if Paul is realizing this one is so hard, there needs to be a reminder that He's coming. Let's be diligent about what we need to do. Let's not decide that we are going to forgive next week or next month. Let's get with it, because He may come back today! What a sad thing for Him to come back today and find us in that state of mind.

Verse 6 tells us the next characteristic of a citizen of heaven: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." We are not to be anxious about anything, because we trust Him. That is the basis of our theology: We trust Him. Therefore we take whatever burden we're carrying—whatever it is that's causing anxiety—and we take it to Him. We give it to Him and we trust Him. So rather than being anxious, we are not anxious; we pray. It is not valid to say, "Yes, I trust God, but I have all this anxiety in my life." Those two cannot coexist. If you take it to God in prayer, then trust Him. Leave it there...and walk away.

The result of that is the next characteristic, which is verse 7: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." The result is peace. It is peace which goes beyond our ability to even comprehend or our ability to even describe. I take whatever it is that's heavy on my heart, and I take it to Him; and I walk away with peace because I trust Him. Someone once defined peace as the possession of adequate resources. That's very good. I take it to God, believing He possesses adequate resources for whatever is heavy on my heart, and I walk away with peace.

I have no more reason to fear today than I did a week ago...or a month ago...or a year ago. I do not believe the basis of my peace is the U. S. Government or the United States Army. And I will not let a mad man in the Middle East take my peace away. My peace is rooted in the all-powerful God. Therefore, rather than being anxious, I'm going to take it to Him and I'm going to trust Him.

Verse 8, in my opinion, is the key that unlocks this whole text. It is what we need to understand if we're ever going to live as a citizen of heaven. If we're ever really going to pursue unity, if we're ever really going to experience joy, if we're ever really going to trade anxiety for peace, if we're ever going to have a forgiving spirit, we've got to understand verse 8. It all comes down to what you choose to allow your mind to dwell on. That's the bottom line. Paul says you have to *choose* what you allow your mind to dwell on.

I want you to think about what your mind has been dwelling on these last several days...or week...or the last month. What is your mind really dwelling on? Imagine that we could shoot those thoughts up on the screen for everyone to see. Let's run those thoughts through the "grid" Paul gives us to see how you're doing.

"Finally, brethren, whatever is true..." Whatever is true; whatever is reliable. Studies show that only 8% of the things we worry about ever come to pass. That means 92% of the things we dwell on are not true. And that gets us into all kinds of trouble. Stop speculating. Just dwell on what is true.

"...whatever is honorable..." That means whatever is noble. The natural man doesn't dwell on things that are noble. But the supernatural citizen of heaven should dwell on things that are honorable—that are noble. If we were to put the thoughts that you dwell on up on the screen, would they seem noble?

"...whatever is right..." We might say upright—whatever is appropriate in the presence of God. If we were to put your thoughts, what you dwell on, up on the screen, would that seem like something that's appropriate in the presence of God?

"...whatever is pure..." Morally pure, yes—but it's more than that. It means pure as in free from the contamination from self and selfishness.

"...whatever is lovely..." Whatever reflects a commitment to love—a commitment to others as more important than ourselves.

"...whatever is of good repute..." That means good reputation. It might be translated "admirable." You put what the natural man dwells on up on the screen, and it isn't very admirable. But if we put what *you* dwell on up on the screen, would you say that's admirable?

Then he summarizes: "...if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me; practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you." Again, Paul puts himself out as the model and he is saying, "If you practice these things, the result will be peace." It flows out of what we choose to allow our minds to dwell on.

What do you allow your mind to dwell on? Sometimes we just dwell on the negative. In my mind, there is a fine line between being informed and dwelling on the news. We need to

understand that when we turn on the news we're turning on the *bad* news. And there's only so much of that you can take in without it dramatically affecting what your mind dwells on.

We need to dwell on that which is right, that which is true, that which is admirable, that which is noble, that which is morally pure, that which seems appropriate in the presence of God. Sometimes in a marriage 90% can be good and 10% is bad, yet we dwell on the bad until we disintegrate the marriage. Sometimes in a church 90% of it can be good and 10% is bad, but we dwell on the bad. Sometimes at work most things are okay, but we have a few things we don't like and we dwell on that. And we make ourselves miserable.

We really need to think about what we allow our minds to dwell on. What I'm about to say may seem very insensitive and may seem lacking in compassion. I don't mean it that way. Actually, what I desire is for us to do what is necessary to appropriate this truth to live. If you found yourself miserable this last week, you have no one to blame but yourself. Because you *can* choose what you allow your mind to dwell on.

The fact of the matter is, there is more magnificent wealth that is available to you because of who you are in Christ than you could possibly exhaust in eternity. And if you choose to, you can dwell on that—that which is right, that which is noble, that which is admirable, that which is pure, that which is excellent. That is your choice. It is only that disciplined mind that is really going to understand a commitment to unity, to experience joy, to have a forgiving spirit, to trade anxiety for peace—to really be able to live like a citizen of heaven.

Our Father, we are thankful for Your truth. Lord, we pray that our minds might dwell on that which is good, that which is right, that which is pure, that which is noble. Lord, may we truly live as citizens of heaven. We understand this is really hard; and, as a matter of fact, for the natural man this is impossible. But You are calling for this life from those who are citizens of heaven—who have the supernatural element that raises us up to live at a whole different level.

Lord, may we learn what it means to have our minds dwell on that which is good. In Jesus' name, Amen.