



Catalog No. 1712
 Philippians 4:4-9
 Twelfth Message
 John Hanneman
 October 4th, 2009

ABANDONED TO GOD

The book of Philippians urges Christians to abandon themselves completely to God, to have the mind of Christ, to live as citizens of heaven, to not cling to earthly things, and to be conformed to the death of Christ in order to participate in resurrection life. If we do all of this, what will our lives look like? What shape will they take? What will be the result of our abandoning ourselves to God?

This is the subject of our text as we come now to Paul's final thoughts in chapter 4.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, 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 comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:4-9 NASB)

The apostle at times ends his letters with a series of staccato-like imperatives, and his assurance that "the God of peace will be with you." Here there are two sets of imperatives, each of which ends with the words "peace of God." We might regard the first set as dealing with Christian piety and the second with Christian ethics. The topics that we take up this morning are joy and gentleness, prayer and peace, holy thoughts and holy actions.

I. Joy

The first repeated command given is to rejoice in the Lord always.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (4:4)

The word group for "joy" occurs 16 times in Philippians. This verse repeats Paul's exhortation in 3:1 and thus frames the second major section of the book (this is why I included the first three verses of chapter 4 in last week's study). Even though the Philippians are facing opposition and suffering for their belief in Jesus, Paul commands them to rejoice in the Lord.

First, the command to joy. Here I want to include some thoughts from a talk given by Darrell Johnson at Regent College.

We all want to live in joy. Everything we do is in pursuit of joy. But we get joy confused with happiness. The word "happy" is connected to the word "happenings." Happiness comes from what is happening or not happening. Joy is different. Joy wells us inside of us independent of circumstances. It cannot be contingent on our circumstances, because those often include opposition, rejection, ridicule, hardships, sacrifice and the hatred of the world.

Paul says we are to rejoice "always," giving the timing and duration. But this does not mean that we should experience joy every minute of every day. One day we will have bodies that are "wired" for constant joy but right now we are not made that way. We can't sustain constant

joy; that can be exhausting. Paul is saying to rejoice in every situation in which we find ourselves, not just pleasant circumstances.

We are to rejoice "in the Lord." The Lord is the basis and ground of our joy. Our joy is found in Jesus who gave his life for us, removing our sin and guilt, so that we could have life. He is also the source of our joy. Joy is the fruit of abiding in him through the Holy Spirit. He is the vine and we are the branches. In the language of Philippians, joy comes from the surpassing value of knowing Christ. Joy can be found no place else save in Jesus. A disconnected branch relying on joy from another source will become joyless.

Joy emerges as we learn to have the mind-set of Christ, one of humility and sacrificial love. This idea is the main theme of Philippians. Joy comes when we give ourselves away in obedience to the pattern of Jesus and follow the example of Paul. It does not come from gaining but from giving.

Joy goes through grief, sorrow, and death. This was the case in Philippi, where believers were suffering for their faith in Jesus. We will not experience true joy without true lament. Ignoring grief does not lead to joy. Neither can we speed up the process of sorrow so we can get to joy faster. Joy comes through death, and then resurrection. It comes in the morning. It is the gift of God who turns our mourning into dancing. Jesus was a man of sorrows, yet his joy was full. Our joy comes from participating in his joy.

There are many obstacles to joy—perfectionism, people pleasing, the need to control and have everything go our way, trying to secure our future financially, etc. In the language of Philippians, these obstacles arise when our mind is set on earthly things. Joy comes when we stop clinging to these and live as citizens of heaven.

The command to rejoice is, in Karl Barth's words, the "defiant nevertheless." The cross is horrendous, but nevertheless there is resurrection. Life is incredibly difficult but nevertheless, God is good. Everywhere there is death, disease, and disappointment but nevertheless there is life from God. In the world there is heartache but nevertheless we can have joy in the Lord. "The cure for a crushed and bitter spirit is to see Christ Jesus the Lord and then to rejoice in him. . . . The believer who practices rejoicing in the Lord will increasingly discover balm in the midst of heartache, rest in the midst of exhausting tension, love in the midst of loneliness, and the presence of God in control of excruciating circumstances."¹

II. Gentleness

The second imperative concerns the character of gentleness.

Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. (4:5)

The meaning of "gentle spirit" is not easy to pin down. The NIV and RSV use the word "gentleness." Other translations say reasonable-ness (ESV) or moderation (KJV). The idea is forbearance, patient steadfastness, self-abasing, self-less. Gentleness stands in contrast to anger, impatience, intolerance, forceful aggressiveness, a spirit of contention, self-promotion. It doesn't mean to be a wimp but to have "a certain kind of willed, self-effacing kindness."² The gentle person stands above or

outside of a difficult situation and demonstrates a consistent graciousness. A gentle person is able to resist the temptation to win, control, seek selfish interests, or insist on having his way.

It is striking that Paul doesn't say let your love or faith be known. But perhaps that is because gentleness is the quality that most encompasses our Lord, who did not take advantage of his equality with God but rather faced a shameful death, with a character of selflessness. In the face of rejection and ridicule, Jesus didn't defend himself but continued to offer grace and kindness to sinners. Peter says of him, "while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet 2:23). This would certainly be relevant for the Philippians.

It is striking that Paul's exhortation is to let our gentleness be known to all men, i.e., to believers and unbelievers alike. We are not to be gracious and self-effacing at church and self-seeking and contentious at home or at work. The clerk at the store, the neighbor down the street, the teller at the bank, our in-laws are all to see the same character of gentleness in us.

What would you like to be known for, your wealth, talents, beauty, or intelligence? Or perhaps you seek to be known for Christian service, your prayer life, your ability to lead Bible studies. Paul says to let your gentleness be known because somehow that is most like Christ.

The command to be gentle is followed by short sentence: "the Lord is near." It's hard to tell if this word goes what proceeds or what follows: "Let your gentleness be known because the Lord is near," or "the Lord is near so do not be anxious." Perhaps Paul is intentionally vague and thus intends both meanings.

"The Lord is near" can mean two things, and again, perhaps Paul has both in mind. He might be saying that Jesus is near in time, which means he is coming soon. James says, "You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near" (5:8). This is in line with one of the themes of Philippians. The future is certain even though the present is difficult. Live now in light of the end, as citizens of heaven. Don't live for earthly glory but set your mind on what is coming—the resurrection of the dead and a new glorious body.

"The Lord is near" might also mean that the Lord is near in space, which means he is close by, he is present with you. Psalm 34 says, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted." (34:18). Psalm 145 says, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him." (145:18). We live as if the Lord was walking beside us, as if he was standing right next to us. How would our life be different if we were consciously aware that Jesus was in the room? Certainly that would motivate us to abandon ourselves to follow his pattern of sacrificial love.

III. Anxiety vs. Praying

The third imperative brings us to a very familiar verse, one which we have used as advice for others on many occasions.

Be anxious for nothing, 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 comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (4:6-7)

The exhortation is to not live anxiously but entrust ourselves to the Father by talking to him. If there were one verse in the Bible that wish I could implement fully, this would be it. I was born with the anxiety gene, so worrying comes very naturally for me. This tendency manifests itself in being overly sensitive around people, thinking that perfection is the only acceptable result, and trying to control the outcome of events with every fiber of my being. If I am not worried about anything, I begin to worry about not worrying. Somehow, somewhere I got the notion that I was responsible for everybody and everything, and if everybody

and everything was fine, then I was fine too. From a very early age I was drawn to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt 6:34). My tendency is to anticipate troubles for the next five years. It's a big job.

Today, awareness of worldwide events is creating anxiety like never before. We worry about the global economy, war in Africa, disasters in Indonesia, identity theft, the ozone layer, and the spread of swine flu across the globe. Added to these are the daily worries of losing our job, car troubles, rebellious teenagers, tensions within our families, and financial security. We live in a stressed-out society. Paul says, "Do not be anxious," and we say, "You have to be kidding me."

All of us have ways to cope with stress and anxiety. Some are better than others, but none of them are very satisfactory. Paul says there is another way, and that is to stop being anxious about anything and be prayerful about everything. We are to entrust everything to the Father because the Lord is near by and he cares. Peter reminds us, "casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7).

The words "prayer" indicates general prayers and "supplication" specific prayers. We let our gentleness be known to men, but we let our requests be known to God, meaning every little detail that is important to us. If it matters to us, then it matters to God. And God hears whatever we ask of him.

When we come to God, we come with a thankful heart, a heart of gratitude for what he has done for us. We live either gratefully or resentfully. We live with a sense that life is a gift or we live with a sense of entitlement. Lack of gratitude is the first step to idolatry (Rom 1:21). "Thanksgiving is an explicit acknowledgement of creatureliness and dependence, a recognition that everything comes as a gift, the verbalization before God of his goodness and generosity."³ Our call to worship this morning conveys this attitude:

Enter His gates with thanksgiving

And His courts with praise.

Give thanks to Him, bless His name. (Psalm 100:4)

One form of prayer that might help us is the prayer of blessing, derived from the Old Testament. It begins with the phrase "Blessed be the Lord." This is followed by a phrase describing who God is or what he has done for which you are grateful. This then is followed by a request based upon the attribute of action of God. Here is an example: "Blessed art Thou, O God, creator of the universe and Father of all creation. Grant to us this day the ability to praise you in ways that express our love for you and our desire to live as sons and daughters in your holy family."⁴

The prayer of blessing helps us develop a grateful heart.

When we turn to God in prayer, Paul says that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds. The peace of God is the opposite of anxiety. Peace is the OT idea of *shalom*, or well being and wholeness. This peace surpasses all comprehension, or transcends all understanding. In other words, it is beyond the grasp of our minds. It doesn't make sense based on the circumstances. The word "guard," a military metaphor, refers to a soldier who guards the city gate. This is a relevant image for the Philippians, since there was a garrison of soldiers stationed in Philippi to guard the Roman peace. The peace of God guards our inner life and keeps our minds from obsessing about things that lead to fear and our hearts from being anxious.

When we come to God in prayer, we not only talk to him about our worries and fears, we hand over to him the outcome. God's peace doesn't come because we get what we ask for or because he magically makes our path smooth. As believers, we have the same pressures as the rest of mankind; we encounter the same difficulties. God's peace comes because we trust him for the results, whatever they might be. Letting go of the outcome is the result of abandoning ourselves to God and trusting

him—a sure sign of spiritual formation. And perhaps the reason for our struggles in the first place is that at last we will come to him and find our rest. We find rest when we drop into the arms of the Father. Just having a carefree personality will not yield this result.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

(William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*)

IV. Holy Thoughts and Actions

The final imperative deals with holy thoughts and actions.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (4:8-9)

Verse 8 is introduced with the word “finally,” the same word we saw in 3:1—a signal that Paul will now wind things up. Verses 8 and 9 have a parallel construction; each contains a list, followed by an imperative. Verse 8 deals with our thoughts, verse 9 our actions.

The first list consists of six adjectives and two nouns. Most of these words describe the best of the Greco-Roman culture, the virtues of the world: “true” as opposed to lies and falsehood; “honorable” and “noble” in contrast to base; “right” or just as opposed to wrong; “whatever is pure” is not tainted with evil; “lovely” is what people have a friendly disposition toward; “good repute” or admirable is conduct well spoken of by people; “excellence” speaks of moral virtue, the best and not the worst; “praiseworthy” refers to those things approved rather than things to be cursed.

Paul brings these words into the Christian sphere and connects them with biblical ideas. He doesn't reject the culture out of hand. We are citizens of heaven, but that does not mean we abandon the world altogether. We can embrace the good wherever we find it as long as it doesn't conflict with the cross.

The imperative is to “dwell” on these things. This is an accounting term, meaning to consider or take into account. The encouragement is to fill our minds, our thoughts with the good, the best, the edifying, the beautiful rather than dwelling on the ugly, the worst, the despicable or the disgusting. The encouragement is be discriminating with regard to what enters our mind. We can't control what the world presents to us but we can control what we think about. We have the power to choose our thoughts, as Dallas Willard states in his book, “Renovation of the

Heart”: “The ultimate freedom we have as human beings is the power to select what we will allow or require our minds to dwell on.”⁵ “If we allow everything access to our mind, we are simply asking to be kept in a state of mental turmoil or bondage. For nothing enters the mind without having an effect for good or evil.”⁶

Every day our minds are bombarded with messages through radio, television, the Internet, movies, cell phones, teachers, family and friends. We are confronted with words and images at an alarming rate. According to Paul's list, many of these are not suitable to dwell on, to put into our mind depository. The media likes to focus on everything that is bad—the ruined lives of the rich and famous, scams and deceit, affairs of public officials, the unlovely and dishonorable lifestyles portrayed in reality shows. Can you image network television stations solely dedicated to what is good and true and pure, like achievements that aid mankind, art and music, service projects to help the poor, or children being helped by mentoring programs? There is so much in the world that could be edifying.

My almost 3-year-old grandson is at our house much of the time. He busies himself playing and moving about. But if we turn on “Go, Diego, Go” on the television, he fixates on the screen and soaks up every word. There is no filter for what he says. How often do we do the same thing?

We really need to form and frame our thinking on God's word. What God says to be true and right and pure should be the thoughts that we dwell on constantly. We are to hide God's word in our heart so that when we see or hear something that is degrading and unworthy, we can quickly change the channel to put our minds back on what is edifying and honoring. We are “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5).

Verse 9 is closely connected with verse 8. Paul urges the Philippians to put into action the things they have learned and received, as students of life in Christ. Then he urges them to put into action the things they have heard and seen in him. They are to follow his example as he urged them in 3:17.

Here is an important truth. First we think, and then we do. Our actions are predicated on our thought life. Again, quoting Dallas Willard: “Our thoughts are one of the most basic sources of our life. They determine the orientation of everything we do and evoke the feelings that frame our world and motivate our actions.”⁷ “If you think holy thoughts, you will be holy; if you think garbage, you will be garbage.”⁸

Again we see a promise: “the God of peace will be with you.” I am reminded of Paul's words to the Romans, “the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace” (8:6). The mind set on God will yield a peaceful presence through the joys and sorrows, successes and failures, victories and struggles. Our Lord is Immanuel, God with us. We hear an echo of Jesus' words: “and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). When we abandon ourselves to God, we find him near.

There is no more fitting hymn for our text than the one we sang earlier:

May the mind of Christ my savior
Live in me from day to day
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say

May the word of God dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour
So that all may see I triumph
Only through His power

May the peace of God my Father
 Rule my life in everything
 That I may be calm to comfort
 Sick and sorrowing

May the love of Jesus fill me
 As the waters fill the sea
 Him exalting, self abasing
 This is victory

V. Conclusion

Many of us are probably realizing how far short we fall of Paul's admonishments. He makes it sound so easy as he rattles off these verses. It's like the things I tell my kids when I go out of town: lock the doors, bring in the mail, take out the garbage. We might be wondering if it is really possible to implement what the apostle is saying. Well, if he said it, then it must be possible. But we would be misguided if we were to just grit our teeth and try harder. We would be deceived if we focused on external manifestations of these things. What matters most is what is happening in our hearts. We abandon our hearts to God, set our minds on Christ, and rely on the power given to renew us through the Holy Spirit. "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass" (1 Thess 5:24).

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord: and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always. (Book of Common Prayer)

- 1 D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 106.
- 2 Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 106.
- 3 Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 409.
- 4 Richard Peace, *Meditative Prayer* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1998), 25.
- 5 Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), 95.
- 6 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 111.
- 7 Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 96.
- 8 Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 115.

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