

February 7, 2021

A PATHWAY TO PEACEFUL OBEDIENCE

Philippians 4:2-9

*(11 of 12 in a series through Philippians)*

One of the glorious realities about the Bible is how its message is true and needed regardless of the time or cultural differences between when it's written and when it's read. We know this is the case, of course, because the ultimate author of this book is the Lord himself, moving the biblical writers through his Spirit to communicate his very words—the very words of the one who rules over all things. Therefore, it shouldn't be surprising that we read God's Word and see that it continually speaks to the situation of our lives in pointed, true, and necessary ways.

But there are times when it can feel almost shocking just how clearly the Bible speaks to the situation in which we find ourselves. I felt that as I began to look at our text this week. Maybe I can set the stage for us a bit so that you might feel how shockingly pointed the text addresses us where we are. If someone were to describe where we are on the last day of January in 2021, I think it'd be fair to start with the reality that there is a lot of division and potential division, and it's not only in the world but threatens the church as well. Not to dive into all the areas of disagreement—you know them well—but just consider the amount of division that has sprung from how we respond to Covid. Just talking about them can reveal not only division but far-too-often *heated* division. And that's really just one umbrella of a topic. We live in a time where division is ripe.

We also live in a time of discouragement. Reports reveal an increase in suicide in America,<sup>1</sup> and my assumption is that depression rates are similar. And these first two elements are sadly combined with a harshness in our dialogue. If you spend any time on social media it can feel like anyone who disagrees on even the most minor of issues is not simply wrong but worthy of every vicious attack that comes his or her way. I doubt anyone would suggest that Twitter or Facebook is the picture of reasonable, gentle discussion on issues of disagreement. And when you combine division, discouragement, and unreasonable harshness, it is not surprising that many are gripped with anxiety. What will happen with the economy, businesses, the health of a loved one, my once close friend who disagrees with me, and on and on? My guess is that if anything I've understated our difficult setting.

And then we open our Bibles to Philippians 4:2-9, and guess what we find Paul telling us? We find him telling us to be unified, to rejoice at all times, to be gentle, and not to be anxious but filled with the peace of God. But what's better is that Paul not only addresses these key needs we have, but he provides us a roadmap on what it looks like to live as a unified, rejoicing, gentle, and peaceful people. So let's dive into each of Paul's exhortations as he begins this final chapter of his letter, and because Paul does fill this section with exhortations (i.e. commands), I will begin

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/Suicide/state/ALL>.

each point as an exhortation as well, saying, “We should” to begin each point. First, then, we should labor for gospel unity.

### **We should labor for gospel unity**

I noted earlier in this letter that when Paul wrote Philippians 1:27-30, he was giving us a blueprint for the rest of his letter. The themes he develops in the rest of the letter really are the fleshing out of elements that he put into that paragraph. There, he had noted that he wanted to hear of this congregation that they were “with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). Immediately after that summarizing paragraph, he had told the Philippians to complete his joy “by being of the same mind” (2:2). And now, in this concluding chapter, he picks up this topic of unity and the particular note of “being of the same mind” in a very specific way, by addressing two women in the congregation. He writes, “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord” (4:2).

By naming these women, Paul is not attempting to humiliate them. In this setting, naming them would have communicated his knowledge of them, care for them, and love for them. They’re not distant from him in his heart. In fact, recall that one verse earlier he had referred to the Philippian believers as “my brothers [and sisters], whom I love and long for . . . my beloved” (4:1). These women weren’t some exception to that. Paul speaks to them particularly because they know he loves them.

Now, we don’t know their exact area of disagreement, but we do know that Paul wants them to “agree [or “be of the same mind”] in the Lord.” I don’t think, therefore, that he means strictly that the two ladies must agree on all things. If it were a major issue dividing them—say, whether Jesus is God the Son or not—Paul would call out the one in error and tell them to repent. So, this must be a disagreement over something that isn’t foundational but has caused a rift nonetheless. And so I don’t think Paul assumes that for these ladies to walk in unity, there needs to be strict agreement. We know, for example, in Romans 14 that he leaves room for believers disagreeing over whether one day should be treated differently than other or all days should be treated alike (Rom 14:5), and we can assume that would carry on to other issues as well.

It seems then that what Paul is exhorting these two ladies to do is to be of the same mind in the Lord on how they think of each other, seek the things of the Lord, and walk in unity. In other words, whether they ultimately hold the same opinion or not, they must count the other as more significant than themselves, not only looking out for their own interest, but that of the other person (2:3-4). They must value shining as lights in this darkened world (2:14-15) more than they do getting their own way. They must “strive side by side” (1:27) for the gospel. In other words, they must not allow their disagreement to lead to God-dishonoring disunity that would allow the glory of the gospel to dim in the eyes of onlookers. And Paul sees this as so important that he asks someone whom he calls a “true companion” intervene, writing, “Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (vv. 2-3).

Brothers and sisters, do not let division over minor elements cause us to move away from our unity in major issues. Yoke ourselves together around the gospel and mission of the church, and let this be so important to us that we're willing to step in and help others walk in unity. In this way, we can shine as lights in a divided world. But Paul does stop with the issue of unity. He also tells us to rejoice at all times.

### **We should rejoice at all times**

After entreating Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord, Paul moves on to his next exhortation, saying in verse 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice." Now, this exhortation can feel a bit hard to handle. We might say to ourselves, "Surely Paul doesn't mean that we should always be able to rejoice?" but as quickly as we might ask that question, Paul repeats himself, "Again I will say rejoice."

But we need to parse out what Paul is saying carefully. Paul is tying our rejoicing here to a rejoicing "in the Lord," not in our particular circumstances. If our particular circumstances become the source of our rejoicing (or lack thereof) then our ability to rejoice will be dependent on factors that are constantly changing. If your circumstances are good, rejoice; if bad, don't rejoice. But Paul wants us always rejoicing, and so he ties our rejoicing to a rejoicing "in the Lord." But what does that mean practically?

My guess is that Paul has in mind the previous phrase he's just used in verse 3. When Paul had spoken of all his fellow laborers, he'd described them as individuals "whose names are in the book of life" (v. 3). The book of life is most entirely referenced in the book of Revelation. And there you can see that the book of life contains names written from "before the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8) of those who belong to Christ. So, for example, Revelation 20:15 says, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Positively, then, those whose names are in the book of life aren't condemned in judgment. They are Christ's.

And though the term "book of life" is not used, there is another reference besides this one and those in the book of Revelation. It's in Luke 10:20. In that context the disciples of Christ are sent out in the power of the Spirit and come back to Jesus, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And Jesus answers, "Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

The phrase "written in heaven" is Jesus' saying their names are written in the book of life. In other words, Jesus is telling them to rejoice that they belong to Christ and will be with him in eternity. But did you catch what he told them to do? He said, "*Rejoice* that your names are written in heaven." In other words, if you are in Christ, then your names are written in the book of life, and therefore you always have reason to rejoice. It doesn't matter what comes in life, you can say, "I hate this cancer but I actually deserve hell and will never see it because I belong to Jesus." This is what I think Paul is driving at after using that phrase to end verse 3 and then

picking up on the command to rejoice “in the Lord” always. Brothers and sisters, if we know Christ, then no matter what circumstances come in this world, we always have reason to rejoice.

And, third, Paul tells us that we should let our gentleness be clearly known.

### **We should let our gentleness be clearly known**

In verse 5, Paul continues, “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” Dennis Johnson notes that a better translation of the word “reasonableness” here is “gentleness,”<sup>2</sup> as it’s only used five times in the New Testament and is used, for example, in contrast to being “quarrelsome” (see 1 Tim 3:3). In other words, Paul tells us that we shouldn’t be quick to anger and harshness, but gentle.

I think sometimes we can forget that gentleness is not just a personality trait but a fruit of the Spirit. Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, *gentleness*, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Now Paul is telling us to display that fruit of the Spirit’s activity in our lives. We should be gentle. When we speak with others, our approach should not be a harsh assuming the worst of someone—especially with regard to our brothers and sisters. We must be gentle—charitable. And our gentleness should be known.

And nor does Paul tell us that it should be known to some while being withheld from others. He says, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” You and I should be characterized by gentleness. Others should bear that testimony of us. Jesus himself told us, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29). People should find us approachable and not barbed, ready to stick them with an attacking and harsh word.

But now we might say, “You said Paul gives us a roadmap.” We fight for unity by remembering our mission in Christ and the gospel and having brothers and sisters walk with us and help us. We rejoice always by remembering that our names are written in the book of life. But how do we walk in gentleness when there are so many attacking us? How do we handle others gently when—to use Paul’s own words—there are so many who are “enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18)?

Well, notice what Paul says at the end of verse 5. Paul writes, “The Lord is at hand.” What he means is that the Lord’s return is imminent. There is nothing left to be accomplished before Christ can return. He may well come at any minute. Now he may tarry another thousand years. But there is nothing prohibiting from coming at any time.

But how does the Lord’s return impact my ability to be gentle? I think the answer is wrapped up in what will happen when the Lord returns. At the return of Christ, he will bring final salvation to

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<sup>2</sup>Dennis Johnson, *Philippians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 267.

his people and final judgment to his enemies. And it's that latter reality—his judgment against his enemies—that frees us to be gentle.

Think of Romans 12 where Paul writes, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:17-21). And so it is here. Be gentle, for the Lord is at hand. Knowing God is coming to judge on that day frees us to be gentle in this one.

And finally, Paul tells us that we should pursue peace in our hearts and minds.

### **We should pursue peace in our hearts and minds**

Now, you may wonder why I word this point "pursue peace" instead of "do not be anxious" because Paul literally says in verse 6, "Do not be anxious about anything"? But my reason is because following his argument reveals a path to actively pursue peace. Let's see if I can show this.

First, he tells us "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (v. 6). So, the first place we start in pursuing peace (instead of anxiety) is to pray. Make your requests known to God. Are you anxious about some issue? Well, pray about that issue, telling God what you request he'd do. But notice how we pray. He says, "by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving." Supplication is simply another way of saying making our requests in prayer. Prayer can contain praise, confession, and many other elements, but supplication refers asking—making requests. So, as you pray, Paul says, ask God for what you desire, and he adds, "with thanksgiving." In other words, Paul isn't calling for a kind of prayer that makes requests while dwelling on the fact that your life is so horrible. It's making requests while focusing on all for which you should be thankful.

Let's see if we might put this together a little bit. Let's say you lose your job. You're anxious about your economic state and know you need a new job. Again, you're tempted to be anxious at every turn. So, you go to pray, asking the Lord to provide for your needs and even provide you another job quickly. Paul would say that as you make those requests to God, you should also say things like, "And, Lord, I thank you that you're the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, that you know my needs before I ask them, that you've promised to work all for my good, that you've so faithfully provided for me to this point, that you're withholding nothing from me that will make me more like Jesus, that you tell me to seek first your kingdom and you'll care for me," and on and on. Do you see how making prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving* is a battle against anxiety—or, we might say, a pursuit of peace.

And this is where the next verse goes. Paul tells us that as we pray with thanksgiving, "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"

(v. 7). In other words, Paul says that God's first answer to your prayers will be peace that guards your hearts and minds from anxiety. And it's more than just the peace that results from thinking about things for which we should be thankful. Paul says that it is peace "which surpasses understanding." God will give you a peace that goes beyond simply being the product of a thankful mind.

So, you battle anxiety by pursuing peace through prayer with thanksgiving, and yet it doesn't stop there. Paul continues our pursuit in verse 8. He begins with what the ESV translates as "finally," but it's the same word translated back in 3:1 that I said at the time is better translated "so then," to signify that Paul is building on what he's just said and moving on. And I think that's what he's saying here. He's saying, "In light of your battle against anxiety and your pursuit of peace, let me tell you more you should do." And so he writes in verse 8, "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."

Do you see what Paul is doing here? There is a receiving of peace. Pray with thanksgiving, and God will give you peace. But there's a pursuing of peace. Be active. Actively think about what is true, honorable, etc. In other words, we don't make our requests known to God with thanksgiving and then proceed to sit with a blank mind. We all know what happens in those moments. The anxious thoughts start working like crazy to occupy your heart and mind again. So there is a fasting—don't give into anxiety. And there is a feasting—pray and pursue thinking about what is good and excellent and honorable. In this way, battling anxiety is like battling lust. Paul tells Timothy, "Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace" (2 Tim 2:22). Fast and feast. Flee anxious thinking and pursue prayer with thanksgiving and thoughts centered on what is true, honorable, just, and excellent. In other words, we're not simply avoiding anxiety but pursuing peace.

Nor does our pursuit end with thinking. We begin to do as well. Paul ends our text in verse 9, saying, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—*practice* these things, and the God of peace will be with you." You want to battle anxiety. Here's the game plan. Pray. Make your requests known to God, with thanksgiving. Then think. Actively focus your thoughts on what is good and right—not on all the negative scenarios anxiety is tempting you to dwell on. And then, start to do. Practice those things that Paul commands. Start to live in obedience to Jesus. And as we do these, the God of peace himself will be close to us, filling us with peace that is more than we could conjure up in our minds alone.

Could a text be more fitting for us in this moment? In a time of division, Paul shows us a path to unity. In a time of discouragement, he shows us why we can always rejoice. In a time of harshness, he shows how we can be gentle. And in a time of anxiety, he lays out the path to pursue peace. And all these things are rooted in the gospel. Apart from Christ living, dying, and being raised so that we might be justified and have eternal life through faith, we have nothing around with to unify, no reason to rejoice, no foundation from which to be gentle, and no peace

even with God. And so we give thanks this morning for the gospel, and by faith pursue obedience to these gracious commands. Amen.