

XIII. Lesson 13 Vital Relationships– Phil. 4:4-7

March 21/29, 2007

Aim: To see how the gospel delivers us from anxiety.

A. Vital Relationships (Phil. 4:4-7)

Much that Paul writes in the closing exhortations of Philippians focuses on the way in which Christians think. In these verses, the apostle turns our attention to the mindset which should govern our ordinary daily experience. This involves our relationship to Christ, to others, and to ourselves. Paul issues three difficult commands: first he commands them to be full of *joy* at all times; secondly, they are to be full of *gentleness*; and finally, they are to be full of *prayer*.

1. Relationship to Christ - Joy (4:4)

An emphasis of joy runs through Philippians. But two things are distinctive about these words. First, Paul speaks about an ongoing and permanently renewed joy. It is to be theirs ‘always.’ Second, Paul exhorts, indeed commands them to ‘rejoice’ (*kairete*). This may strike us as unusual, if not impossible, because we have sometimes been misled into thinking of joy, just as we tend to think of love, as primarily a matter of feelings and spontaneous emotions. These, by definition, cannot be commanded; they simply happen. But that is a distortion of the biblical teaching.

Our feelings are molded by what we think and will. In a rightly-ordered life, emotions or feelings are directed to what is good and gracious; these things are desired and loved. Our feelings and emotions are not isolated from our thinking and willing but guided by them. That order was overturned by sin; it always is. Our wills now tend to be dominated by our feelings; our thoughts are often ruled by our wills. Because of sin we are able to rejoice only when we feel good. By contrast Paul is telling us to rejoice no matter what we feel.

How is that possible? How can we rejoice when our lives are full of so much trouble? Paul is not calling here for some kind of general, happy optimism that has no basis. This joy is not based on how we feel about our personal circumstances, but on the fact of our fellowship with Christ, and on the facts about Him. ‘In the Lord’ (*en kurios*) is the governing factor in the exhortation. It is the Philippians’ faith ‘in the Lord’ which makes rejoicing in the throes of opposition a glorious possibility. Paul’s appeals to joy are never simply encouragements; they are above all, appeals to faith.

If we want to have peace in our hearts and minds, we must remember that joy is not dictated by our surroundings. Christian joy does not depend on changing circumstances; it depends on the One who does not change. Those who have grasped the biblical truth that they are justified by grace through faith in Christ are able to rejoice even in their sufferings (Rom. 5:1-3). Here is a joy that transcends immediate circumstances.

The fear of the unknown is one of the greatest causes of our anxiety, but the Lord Jesus Christ is so different from anyone on earth. He never changes (Heb. 13:8). If we put our trust in Him we need never be cast down (Is. 26:3). If we are to rejoice in the Lord always, then we must look away from ourselves. True Christian joy, which leads to the absence of worry, is not inward-

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looking. It does not concentrate on thinking about our own happiness (that is selfishness, which Paul tells us to avoid). Joy is directed towards pleasing God.

Paul's formula for joy is apparent in this letter. We can summarize it by saying we must have:

- The **Cause of Christ** as our priority. That cause, of course, includes the fellowship, the furtherance, and the faith of the gospel (1:5, 12, 27);
- The **Character of Christ** as our pattern. This is the character of sacrificially giving one's self up in the interests of others (2:5-8);
- The **Comprehension of Christ** as our passion. This means crying out with Paul 'that I may know Him' (3:10);
- The **Care of Christ** as our peace, which the apostle is about to express (4:6-7).

2. Relationships to Others - Gentleness (4:5)

Our 'reasonableness' or 'gentleness' is to be 'known to everyone,' in the way we are patient and kindly in our dealings with others. This command seems unrelated to the exhortation to 'rejoice;' but there is a connection. The people who are joyful are those who have been delivered from an obsession with themselves and their immediate circumstances. But that is also a prerequisite to being 'reasonable.' The joyless person can never be a gentle person.

The Greek word for 'gentleness' (*epieikes*) has a very broad range of meaning. It may best be summed up as 'fair-mindedness' or 'graciousness.' Others translate it as forbearance, yieldedness, geniality, kindness, sweet reasonableness, considerateness, charitableness, mildness, or magnanimity. It is the attitude of a man who is charitable towards men's faults and merciful in his judgment of their failings because he takes their whole situation into reckoning. If we want to take God's route to freedom from worry then we should never brood over the wrong that others do. In context, it is to be the spirit of willingness to yield under trial which will show itself in a refusal to retaliate when attacked.

Paul gives us a specific reason for this quality: 'the Lord is at hand' (*o kurios engus*). This is either a quotation of Ps. 145:18 ('The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth'), or a variation of the early Christian watchword and invocation of the Lord's coming, *Marana tha*, 'our Lord, come!' (1 Cor. 16:22; cf. Rev. 22:20).

His coming again is near at hand; in fact, the return of Christ is always 'at hand.' Consequently, Paul believed that Christians must always be ready for that great day. If we are bowed down with care we too should remember that soon all of this anxiety and strain will be over for us. Paul is then saying: live daily with the expectation that the Lord will return as your Savior, and also as the Judge of the world. Let that thought create a spirit of gentleness in you. For you know Him as Savior; He has been gentle with you although you deserve His judgment.

But Christ is near in another sense: 'The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit' (Ps. 34:18). It is one of the great sources of comfort to the believer that he experiences the presence of God with him every moment of the day. Taking these interpretations together – since Paul's words may be deliberately ambiguous – we find the reason why we are to have compassion on those who may be our enemies. Christ will be their judge; we are not.

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3. Relationship to Ourselves - Prayer (4:6-7)

The joyful person is not likely to be dominated by anxiety; the anxiety-ridden spirit cannot be a joyful one. ‘Do not be anxious’ (*meden merimnate*) is a negative command based on the idea that anxiety (*merimna*) betrays a lack of trust in God’s care. But how can we be delivered from anxiety? The prescription is prayer. That means we must direct our thoughts and desires towards God. If we want to be free from worry we must stop thinking about ourselves and our needs. We are not to be anxious ‘about *anything*.’ Instead we are to be prayerful. We may be freed from all fretful care and feverish anxiety because we may refer all our distresses and problems to God in prayer. Our motto should be: ‘Worry about nothing; pray about everything.’ Anxiety cannot continue to breathe easily in an atmosphere suffused with prayer.

Paul uses various terms for prayer (‘prayer,’ ‘supplication,’ ‘thanksgiving,’ ‘requests’). He is speaking about the careful, patient spreading of our needs before God, detailing our situation and our anxieties (*cp.* Ps. 55:22). It is clear, now, why paralyzing anxiety cannot co-exist with prayer; the heart that has unburdened itself, and has been returned to a spirit of praise cannot remain permanently anxious.

The general word for ‘prayer’ (*proseuche*) means coming into God’s presence. The word ‘petition’ (*deesis*) means asking for things, because God is able to supply needs. However, we must remember that when we ask for things, our prayer must be characterized by ‘thanksgiving’ (*eucharistia*), remembering how very gracious God has been to us. An ungrateful child always seeks more from his parents without giving thanks for what he has received. We are not to be ungrateful children. If we are not thankful to God for all He is and all He does, then we are not approaching Him in the right spirit. Finally, ‘requests’ (*aitemata*) means that we should pray for definite, precise, or specific matters.

‘Peace’ (*eirene*) is in the Old Testament a kingly blessing following directly upon acknowledgment of God’s reign and the submission of all his foes. In New Testament terms, we can only know His peace as we first receive His grace in reconciliation. ‘The peace of God’ follows directly from peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1) who made that peace by the blood of His cross (Col. 1:20).

The verb ‘transcends’ or ‘surpasses’ (*hyperechousa*) is allied to the noun translated ‘surpassing greatness’ or ‘excellency’ in 3:8.

‘Will guard’ (*phrouresei*) is a military term, indicating the duty of a Roman sentry to watch over or to guard. Paul speaks about this peace as though it were a military garrison – an apt picture for Christians in Philippi which itself was constantly guarded by a garrison of Roman soldiers. Just as a sentry was constantly manning the door of his prison, so the peace of God was continually guarding his heart (controlling all his emotions) and his mind (pervading all his thinking). The apostle is saying: God Himself is the ‘God of peace’ (v. 9); it is the atmosphere of heaven. You are in a world full of trouble and anxiety, far from the heavenly city of which you are a citizen. But God sends a garrison of peace to guard you while you are away from your homeland. Bunyan uses this picture in the appointment and patrol of Mr. God’s-Peace in the town of Mansoul.

The wonderful thing is that every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ can know that same peace. It does not come from within ourselves. It comes to us directly from God. It is the peace of God. It belongs to Him, and He graciously imparts it to us.

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B. Application & Discussion Questions

- *In the life of the Christian, what should be the relationship between mind, will, and emotion? In what ways does this relationship tend to be disrupted? What are the consequences? How can we learn to order our lives properly?*
- *How can we promote joy in our lives?*
- *Gentleness, patience, and kindness are all qualities Paul regards as essential in Christian living. How is Christ our example in these areas? Why are these graces minimized so frequently? How can we develop them?*
- *In what two senses may Christ be said to be ‘at hand?’ What are the implications the New Testament draws from this?*
- *Why is our society so anxiety-ridden? What are the characteristics of the prayer Paul describes as a remedy?*

For next time: Read Philippians 4:8-13 and Ferguson chapter 25