

Rejoice in the Lord

Philippians 4:2-7

Is it possible to command joy? Interesting question, isn't it? Can joy be commanded? Can you command another person to be joyful? Can you command any such human impulses or even emotions. To be sure, if you see joy merely as an uncontrollable human impulse, then you can't command it, for it would not be able to be controlled. If you see joy as consisting merely of superficial, emotional happiness, then there are times when you cannot command it. You can't command happiness, because you can't deny the existence of genuine, emotional sorrow, not in the fallen world in which we live. Same thing with worry, for if worry is seen as a necessary aspect of your personality, something beyond the realm of conscious choice, then it cannot truly be commanded, for you can't properly command something over which you have no control.

But if joy and worry are seen in a moral context, if they are seen to have moral qualities, one good and the other bad, then the commands and exhortations which we read this afternoon are proper and quite helpful.

So don't discount the force of these words because you might have genuine emotions of sorrow. And don't ignore the profound exhortation against worry simply because you are inherently disposed to worry about everything. While some people are clearly more tempted and more susceptible than others, these are moral issues, issues that come immediately after Paul has exhorted the church to stand firm in the Lord. And so that is the context. Here is how you stand firm, here is how you stand strong in your Christian life and faith. It begins with,

I. A PROPER DISPOSITION.

It's a familiar verse, a common thought.

v.4

Something is wrong today, in most places, because joy is so often absent. Even among Christians. And the pursuit of joy so often misunderstood. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. It is not the same thing as pleasure or physical satisfaction. It is far deeper, a characteristic of the disposition. A frame of mind. An aspect of what I often call the affections. It is an issue of soul.

Joy could be described as happiness in soul. It is an inner delight in God that reaches down to the very core of your being. It's not so much how you feel, but rather the deepest internal condition of your heart. It is the contented satisfaction of believing that God is good and all that he does in your life is good.

And true joy is found only in the Lord! I can say that with great confidence, because I know the effect of sin. I know the effect of guilt and a guilty conscience. I know the experience of a man brought to salvation. There is joy only when God restores your relationship with him. And, therefore, the command is that,

A. We are to rejoice in the Lord.

The foundation of that joy is the sure and certain confidence of those who know they possess eternal life.

1 John 5:11 "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God."

I must start there. For as Paul says in Romans 5, we "rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

Now if you don't have that hope, if you are not confident that you have been freed from the guilt of your own sin, if you are not confident that God is your father in heaven who loves you, if you are not confident that Jesus has died for your sins so that you might have life, then I can't imagine you will ever experience much joy.

But if you have that hope, your circumstances here in this present world take on a whole different perspective. And you can have joy even in the midst of struggles, for as Romans 5 continues, "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

We see a similar reference to joy in John's gospel, John 15:11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

So we are commanded. Rejoice in the Lord. You are called to appropriate God's promises into your own heart and soul. Believe what God says about himself and believe what he says he will do. Stimulate and stir up your own faith, in order to produce this sort of joy.

Many of the Psalms are so especially good about that, since they are such real life experiences of trial and struggle. And finding joy in the midst of it all. One such example is,

Ps. 16:8 "I have set the LORD always before me; Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will rest in hope. 10 For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your

Holy One to see corruption. 11 You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

So the command to rejoice in the Lord is the command to believe those things. The command to rejoice in the Lord is the command to set the Lord always before you, to live in the conscious awareness of his loving presence and sovereign control. It is the command to set him at your right hand, that is, to find your strength and stability in him. And it is the command to bring yourself into his presence.

In other words, if you find your soul lacking in joy, there are many things for you to do to have that joy restored. Most especially, come into his presence in worship. Join with the congregation for corporate worship. And worship him every day in the solitude of your own closet.

The focus of the command is not so much upon our need to artificially stir up joy within ourselves, but to find our joy IN THE LORD. And to do so continuously. The Greek verb for rejoice is in a tense which refers to such continuous and habitual action. It's not a one time thing, but a constant obligation.

And that is hard when the world tells us to find our happiness in other places. The world tells you that if you had more money, you would be happy. If you had better health, you would be happy. If you have a successful job, or a successful marriage, or children, you will be happy. The world says that if you can make yourself a little more comfortable, a little more relaxed, a little more fulfilled, or a little more satisfied with sensual pleasures, then you will be happy. If we could just be done with all this COVID stuff, we would be happy. And full of joy.

But it isn't so, is it? A joyful disposition only develops in a heart that loves God.

v.4

A second aspect of that proper disposition is that,

B. We are to demonstrate gentleness.

Gentleness is such a wonderful thing. Such a godly thing. And something that really isn't possible without the inner security of true joy. A heart in turmoil, a soul with a great absence of settled contentment won't produce a gentle spirit. No, a gentle spirit naturally proceeds from a joyful heart.

And Paul connects them here.

v.4-5

Gentleness, like joy, is a fruit of the spirit. Like joy, it is a work of God in us, but also a character we are commanded to display. Lay hold of the presence of Jesus in your own life, and exercise gentleness.

The Greek word actually refers to someone who is very reasonable in making judgments, not rash or harsh or abrupt. The word moderation is a good translation. The Greek word signifies a humble, patient steadfastness which is even able to submit to injustice, disgrace and maltreatment without hatred and malice. Other English words come to mind. Big-hearted. Geniality. Kindliness. Magnanimity. Even generosity. As one commentator notes, "There is not a single word in the English language that fully expresses the meaning of the original."

Bottom line, we are to be reasonable people. A reasonable response is called for to all the circumstances of life. And to all the people of your life. Because the Lord is at hand. The Lord's

coming is at hand. The Lord shall return. The Lord shall make all things right. That's your proper perspective on life. And that will produce the proper disposition.

Such joy is related to something else, though. Something more capable of its destruction than anything else. What is it that can ruin your joy more quickly and more certainly than anything else? WORRY. And so Paul defines for us,

II. A PROPER RESPONSE TO WORRY.

The command is equally plain.

A. We are to put aside anxiety.

v.6a

Now, I want to recognize and acknowledge that there is a physical and medical aspect of anxiety. There is some anxiety that is simply a side-effect of certain medications and certain physical ailments. There is a legitimate place, therefore for some medical treatment regarding anxiety. I don't want to deny that.

But I don't want to deny the obvious, either. Anxiety is a moral issue! Worry is a moral issue. We are commanded to "Be anxious for nothing."

Leaving aside medical, clinical issues for a moment, let me ask, "What is anxiety?" In some senses, we could say it is simply taking responsibility upon ourselves that rightly belongs only to God! Anxiety is an undue burden that causes us to fret about things about which God says to trust him.

In Matthew 6, with plain and clear language, Jesus says, Mat. 6:25 "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what

you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? 28 So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; 29 and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31 "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

God says, "I will take care of certain things." I will take care of things like the necessities of life--what you will eat or what you will drink. I will take care of that. I will take care of your clothing. Those things are my responsibility, says the Lord.

Worry is taking those concerns back upon ourselves, as if it depends upon us to provide those things in our own strength. NO WONDER WE WORRY! The load is too great.

Certainly, we are called to faithfulness, and obedience. But the responsibility to provide belongs to God. With characteristic clarity, Jesus says our responsibility lies in seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Then God says, all these things shall be added to you.

We are to put aside anxiety! And let me say that to you as an exhortation. As a command. Put away anxiety, O Ye of little faith, as Jesus says. What a gentle, but certain, rebuke, for the presence of worry reveals a faith that is very little.

And what is it that defines a big faith? Prayer! As the immediate and obvious solution to the plague of anxiety, Paul says "PRAY."

B. We are to pray to God to take care of our needs.
v.6

Such a direct contrast. Do not worry, but in everything, pray. In everything. In every circumstance. In every situation. Pray. And pray specifically, as the English word "supplication" implies. Ask God specifically to help with specific things! Let your requests be made known to God!

With thanksgiving!

There really is no better place in the Bible to learn about prayer than this text. And we need to learn, and learn more. Prayer is the expression of depending upon God instead of depending upon yourself. Prayer is trusting God. Prayer is the expression of a child to a father, and that's why we are to pray.

God already knows what you will pray. I won't begin to try to deny that. I believe it wholeheartedly. God knows everything. He's God. He's sovereign. He's in control. But we pray because we are little children who trust our heavenly father to give us everything that we need.

Let me challenge you this afternoon, and encourage you on to deeper faith, with this exhortation: Every time that you are

tempted to worry, every time that anxiety creeps into your bones, pray. Every time. You may well come to understand the meaning of the phrase, "Pray without ceasing." And that's good!

Replace your anxiety with prayer requests!

A couple weeks ago I stressed the need to live up "to the degree that we have already attained," from Philippians 3:16. Here is one good example, good for you and good for me. I think that you all probably know this, and to some degree, probably do it. But the exhortation is do it more! Instead of worrying about something, pray about it.

To use our common vernacular, take to God. And leave it with him!

v.6

Pray at all times. In that regard, Jesus had this to say, Luke 18:1 He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' 4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 'yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' 6 Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 "I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

If we are giving in to our worry, and failing in our prayers, then Jesus will not find faith on the earth! For worry is a contradiction

of faith. It is an enemy of faith, and I want you to see it that way. I want you to treat it that way.

With this great promise and encouragement,
v.7

Let me end by trying to explain,

III. A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF PEACE.

Peace, like joy, can be defined so many ways. Let me define it this way, as the absence of strife. In its most obvious form, peace is the absence of warfare, the cessation of warfare, the end of hostility.

Most of all, most of all, therefore, let me proclaim to you that peace really does mean peace with God.

Many people look in vain for peace. Many people think wrongly about the source of peace and the experience of peace. They think it to be some sort of internal self-satisfaction, even being at peace with themselves. Or at peace with their circumstances. There is a lot of emphasis upon peace in our culture at Christmastime. But for many people, it remains so elusive. Because real peace is peace with God. And to speak properly, I must say that,

A. Peace is found only in God.

Paul calls it the peace of God. And there is no other. The prophet Isaiah understood that.

Is. 26:3 "You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You."

And on the contrary, it is just as sure,

Is. 48:22 “There is no peace,” says the LORD, “for the wicked.”

There is none, though they search for it. They search for it in all the wrong places. In earthly relationships, perhaps. In worldly pleasures or indulging in whatever appeals to their senses. But there is no peace in the heart of a man until he is at peace with God.

And no man can be at peace with God until he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. Back to,

Rom. 5:1 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand.”

Peace means reconciliation. It means the enmity that we created by our sin is removed.

Rom. 5:11 “And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.”

More specifically,

2 Cor. 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. 18 Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

Peace is found only in God, in the honor and reverence that is due to God. And it is found only by those who trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation. Peace is the restoration of our relationship with God! And that,

B. Peace goes beyond mere rational explanations.

v.7

It passes all understanding. Peace is not a doctrine that I can teach you, not in its fullness. It is not something you grasp with your intellect. It's not something you can learn from a book. Rather, it is the experience of being made right with God!

It is the experience of knowing that your sins are forgiven. It is the experience of knowing that you have been adopted in the family of God, that you have been given the spirit of sonship. It is the experience of knowing that you have eternal life.

You will often have strong feelings associated with that knowledge, and peace is often something that you can feel. There is an important subjective element to it, something that does penetrate to the depth of your soul. And it is a good feeling! It is a good experience.

And it goes beyond your circumstances. Good or bad, whatever comes to you, you can have peace. It is therefore, closely related to joy. And it is a peace that is joined with the confidence of God's protection.

C. Peace is the consequence of God's perfect protection.

Thus, the whole verse.

v.7

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God will guard, protect you? In all circumstances?

What, then, makes you worry? Usually it comes as the result of your own analysis of a situation. You look at a situation, and you conclude, that's dangerous. So you worry. Peace, on the

other hand, comes when you look at a particular situation, then trust God to protect you, and think to yourself, “God will take care of me.” That’s peace. As I read earlier,

Is. 26:3 “You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You.”

And so we read in John’s gospel,

John 16:33 “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Tonight, I preach that peace to you. It is a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that comes through Jesus Christ, just as he was announced by the angels at his birth.

Luke 2:8 “Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 14 “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

Therefore, dear friends,
v.4-7