

“Get Into the ACTS”

Philippians 4:4-9

Sermon Series: Enter the Center

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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On this Labor Day Weekend, when we try to rest from all our stress, it might be fun to take this stress test. What is your response to these questions?

- Can you start the day without caffeine?
- Are you always cheerful, ignoring aches and pains?
- Can you resist complaining about your troubles?
- Are you understanding when loved ones are too busy to give you any time?
- Can you overlook it when someone takes their frustrations out on you though you did nothing wrong?
- Can you take criticism and blame without resentment?
- Can you relax without liquor?
- Can you sleep without the aid of drugs?
- Can you honestly say deep in your heart you have no prejudice?

If you scored 100% on this then you are almost as good as your dog.¹

One of the goals of our Enter the Center series on prayer is to receive God’s gifts of contentment and peace. The Apostle Paul shares the secret of contentment with the Philippian Church. He writes this letter while in jail, in Rome, chained to a soldier. You would expect despair to pour from his pen. Nothing is further from the truth. He writes,

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Philippians 4:4-5

This sounds impossible. How can you be happy all the time? Well that’s not what Paul says. Happiness is a lack of bad stress. Joy is contentment and peace in stressful circumstances. The Greek word “rejoice” also means thrive and be healthy. It was used as a greeting. Our word “Hello” originally meant, “Be healthy.” “Farewell” means “I hope

¹ Adapted from "Mikey's Funnies," a daily e-mail humor list (6-26-02)

you fare well or stay well.” “Goodbye” of course means “God be with you.” And that’s exactly what Paul is saying here. It’s not a command to be happy all the time. Paul wants them to be well in the Lord. Be content in the Lord. Be gentle in the Lord. Be at peace in the Lord. Be joyful in the Lord. God is with you. The Lord is near.

How do you Enter that Center and be at peace? First **Release with Prayer**.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6

The word “anxious” means to have a divided or distracted mind. It’s a person pulled in different directions. It’s someone who is overwhelmed with a problem. Paul is not telling us to never feel anxious. He is anxious about his friends (Philippians 2:28), his churches

(2 Corinthians 11:28) and his life (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). Paul offers a way to release anxiety: prayer. Every time an anxious thought fills you mind, every time worry clutches your soul, lift it up to God in prayer. Place it in God’s strong and powerful hands. Ask God’s help to deal with the burden. And then – this may seem strange – give thanks. Why is thanksgiving so essential? It reorients your thinking. Recovering alcoholics tell me they often write a gratitude list. Why? Because they say, “Stinking thinking leads to drinking.” Negative thoughts lead to problems. A mind filled with gratitude leads to peace. Give thanks for His presence and His power. Give thanks for the blessings in your life. Give thanks for how God can bring good out the problem.

Let me add that this is not a once and done prayer. Paul says, “in every situation.” That means every time you are in the ring, going ten rounds with anxiety, don’t wrestle, release it to God in prayer. Lift it up. This will seem awkward and ineffective at first but keep doing it. Prayer is a muscle which gets stronger the more you lift things up to God. I once met a guy at the gym named Nick. He is able to lift these massive weights while I strain to lift these puny weights. Yet he told me, “You can do it. Just keep working at it.” Then he added, “You can do all things through Him who gives you strength.” I think I’ve heard that somewhere before. Release with Prayer.

Next, **Receive His Peace**. In the next verse Paul writes,

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7

Notice, if you give your problems and burdens to God, in return He gives you His peace. This is God’s peace – the peace God feels inside. He wants to fill you with His peace. It is a calm you cannot explain. It’s serenity that doesn’t always make sense. It’s the gift of the Holy Spirit. On the night before His crucifixion Jesus said,

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27

This peace not only fills the space your problems once took, it actually protects and guards you. Scholars point out the irony that Paul uses a war-like term to describe God’s

peace. The word “guard” usually describes a garrison of Roman soldiers who stand watch and protect a city. God’s peace protects and defends your heart and mind.

When it comes to stress and emotional issues, the battlefield is not out there. It’s in the mind and the heart. A lot of lies try to work their way into our minds and hearts. Some of these come from Satan, the father of lies. Some come from the media, our enemies, our coworkers and schoolmates, even our family. When we let them in and listen to them they control our thoughts, disturb our emotions and add to our stress. Some of these lies are: You’re not good enough, smart enough, tall enough, thin enough, pretty enough, old enough, young enough. The most fundamental lie is, “You are not enough.” God wants to protect your heart and mind from these lies. Scripture says,

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! I John 3:1

Remember we started the Enter the Center series with your Heavenly Father whispering to you: “You are my child, the one I love. With you I am well pleased.” When that truth fills you, it protects your mind and heart and gives you peace. Many going through a troubling work situation, an uncertain illness, a family conflict, a journey of grief have said to me, “I can’t explain it, but I’m getting through this with God’s peace.” Do you want to listen to the father of lies or the Father who loves you?

Finally, **Rely on His People.** Paul ends by saying,

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:9

Paul offers his life as an example of how to replace anxiety with peace. Find some peaceful people and stick with them. Look for the one who is calm under pressure. The one who doesn’t lose their head when others do. The one who thinks clearly in a crisis. The one who knows the next step to take. The one who prays. You can’t fake peace. But you can follow someone who is peaceful. Learn from them. Let them coach you. Ask them to listen to you. Ask them to pray for you. Often, when people are anxious they shout or go silent. Don’t shout. Reach out. Don’t hide. Get alongside a peaceful person. If you join Griefshare, a Growth Group or a Microchurch this fall you will find a team of people who will help you receive God’s peace.

I want to give you a chance to practice what I just preached. In your bulletin is a prayer outline I learned in high school. It’s called the ACTS prayer. It follows the pattern of the Lord’s Prayer. It begins with God. You start not with requests but with praise, confession and thanksgiving. If you begin by praising the God of the Universe, asking forgiveness for where you fall short, thanking Him for the many blessings He showers upon you, then your requests and concerns don’t appear so overwhelming or impossible.

Adoration simply means, “I love you Lord because you are...” You can list the attributes of God – almighty, ever-present, gracious, loving. For inspiration you may read

Psalms 8, 19, 23, 46, 95, 100, 148. We don't praise God because He needs it. Praise helps us realize how powerful, mighty and loving God is. Adoration helps us be awed by God.

Confession is saying, "Forgive me Lord for..." It's important to be specific. Where have I been selfish, prideful, hurtful? The more honest we are with ourselves, the more healing and relief can come. Also ask God to help you forgive others.

Thanksgiving allows us to pause and say, "Thank you Lord for..." This is your opportunity to count your spiritual, relational and material blessings as well as to take stock of answered prayers. I find nothing lifts the heaviness of self-pity as good as gratitude for all God's gifts and all the good in my life.

Supplication is just a fancy word for our requests. When you say, "Please Lord..." you lift up requests for you, your family, your work or school, the church, our community, nation and world.

Let's get into the A.C.T.S.!