

To Rejoice is a Choice

Philippians 4:4-9

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Recently, I had two very joyful experiences. Ever since I graduated from Moody Bible Institute, I've wanted to return and be a guest lecturer in a class. After 40 years, it finally happened as I was asked to give a senior pastor's perspective on worship ministry in a church. Much of what I shared are things I've learned from Pastor Chad.

It's very funny that I was asked to speak to a class of gifted musicians because I'm not musical at all. While my grades were good in my Bible and Theology classes, I barely passed my required "Music Appreciation Class." The students found this pretty funny as well. I almost had a panic attack when I realized the class was held in the exact room where I almost failed my only class at Moody.

My second experience with joy happened when I journeyed up to Wisconsin to hang out with my dad last Saturday. We ate cheese curds (they should be called "joy curds"), shared funny memories while driving through our old neighborhood, walked around Farm and Fleet, spent time in a cemetery, and enjoyed thick malts at Mullen's Dairy Bar in Watertown.

It's fair to say Moody and Wisconsin are my happy places. In the just-released 2025 World Happiness Report, Finland remains the happiest country in the world for the eighth consecutive year, while the United States sank to its lowest ever, coming in at 24th. This ties into what Pastor Chris shared last weekend about how contentment levels have cratered while anxiety levels are crushing us. I appreciated his main point: *God will provide exactly what we need, exactly when we need it, to the extent we need it. Until Jesus is enough, we'll never have enough.*

In Philippians 4:4-9, Paul challenges us to develop three attitudes. These attitudes must be demonstrated in three actions. And when we act, God gives us two assurances. Here's our main point today: *In your journey to joy, remember you have a choice to rejoice.*

Let's read our text together: ***"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶do not be***

anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 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. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me— practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Attitudes to Develop

1. Be joyful always. The first attitude to cultivate is to make the choice to rejoice. Look at verse 4: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”* The word *“always”* means, *“at all times, perpetually.”* Spurgeon writes, *“Well then, that begins at once, certainly. So let us now begin to rejoice in the Lord.”*

Because many of us are more like Eeyore than Tigger, we push back on being joyful when our life is filled with junk. Many of us don’t think we have a choice to rejoice, so we need to hear this command again and again. This is reinforced in Philippians 3:1: *“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord...”* The command to rejoice is in the present tense and the active voice. It can be translated like this: *“Go on being glad in the Lord.”*

Let’s make some additional observations.

- **Joy is the theme of Philippians.** The call to rejoice is stated or implied 16 times in this brief book.
- **Joy is different than happiness.** How many of you remember the earworm song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”? It’s not that easy, is it? Happiness is situational and often superficial, while joy is sustained and secure. To say it another way, happiness is often linked to what is *happening*. You might not have anything to be happy about today; but if you are redeemed by the Lord, there are always reasons to rejoice in the Lord.
- **Joy is centered in the Lord, not in circumstances.** People change, situations change, bad news comes, but the Lord remains the same. Psalm 32:11 says: *“Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!”* Joy is not tied to a place but to the Person of Jesus. *When I find it difficult to rejoice in my situation, I can always rejoice in my salvation.*

- **Joy is possible 24/7.** We are to rejoice in the Lord *“always.”* This is reinforced in 1 Thessalonians 5:16: *“Rejoice always.”*
- **Rejoicing in the Lord is an action, not a feeling.** It would be good to practice praising God when you don’t feel like it. When things are falling apart, run to the Rock and rejoice in the Lord. *God chooses what we go through; we choose how we go through it.*
- **Joy is a fruit of the Spirit.** Galatians 5:22 says, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...”* If you desire to be more joyful, get closer to Jesus. If you want to see more fruit, make sure you’re connected to the root. In John 15:11, Jesus says that His joy is in us *so that* our joy may be *“full.”*

2. Be gentle to everyone. Verse 5 gives us the second attitude to cultivate: *“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone...”* I think Paul still had the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche in mind. The word *“reasonableness”* is variously translated as “forbearance,” “mildness,” “gentleness,” “moderation,” “large-heartedness,” “forbearing” and “inner calmness.” This attitude is especially important when we’re in the middle of conflict because it’s easy to get defensive, be dismissive, or demonize someone we disagree with.

I appreciate this helpful paraphrase: *“Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you’re on their side, working with them and not against them.”* To be reasonable has the idea of yielding to others. It’s the opposite of contentiousness. Gentleness breathes grace into the midst of tension. Remember the truth of Proverbs 15:1: *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*

When people think of you, do they consider you to be gracious or gruff? Are you abrupt and abrasive in your conversations with others? Do you find yourself judgmental toward those who are still investigating Christianity? This same word is used in 2 Corinthians 10:1: *“I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ...”* Mark Roberts says, *“The more Christ is alive in you, the more you will be known as a gentle person.”*

3. Jettison anxiety. After cultivating joy and germinating gentleness, the first part of verse 6 describes the third attitude to develop: *“Do not be anxious about anything...”* Someone has said that there are more people addicted to anxiety than to all other addictions combined. According to a 2024 study, 43% of adults said they felt more anxious than they did the previous year, up from 37% in 2023.

This verse commands us to not worry. The King James says it even stronger: ***“Be anxious for nothing.”*** The construction in the original forbids the continuance of an action already habitually going on. It literally means, *“Not even one thing.”* The word ***“anxious”*** means, *“to divide or be pulled in different directions.”* The old English root from which we get the word *worry*, means, *“to strangle.”*

One woman couldn't sleep at night because she worried for a decade that her and her husband's home would be broken into. One night her husband heard a noise in the house, so he went downstairs to investigate. When he got there, he found a burglar and said to him, *“Could you wait a moment so I can introduce you to my wife? She's been waiting for someone to steal our stuff for 10 years!”* A real robber can rob your belongings once; but worry can steal your soul night after night. I'm told that over 100 diseases can be directly attributed to worry! One medical website says stress is the common risk factor in 75-90% of diseases.

Charlie Brown once said to Linus: *“I worry about school a lot.”* After pondering that thought, he said, *“I worry about worrying so much about school.”* After reflecting some more, he concluded, *“Even my anxieties have anxieties!”* Friends, worry is wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles.

Let's consider these three questions:

- What did you worry about this week?
- How much time did you spend worrying? 30 minutes? An hour? All day? Several nights? All week?
- What did your worrying accomplish?

Several years ago, a professor at a leading American university studied what people worry about. His research discovered that:

- 40% of what we worry about never happens.
- 30% of our worries concern the past.
- 12% of worry is about our health.
- 10% of worry is about petty issues.
- 8% of the things we worry about are legitimate concerns.

That means that 92% of our “worry time” is wasted energy. But Paul is saying we’re not to worry about the 8% either. Why is that? Because when we worry, we’re really saying that God can’t take care of us, that our problems are bigger than His promises. The commentator R.H. Mounce put it like this, “*Worry is practical atheism and an affront to God.*” One author adds, “*We can worry, or we can worship.*”

It’s like the weary Christian who was awake all night trying to hold the world together by his worrying. About 3:00 a.m., he imagined the Lord saying, “*You go to sleep now, Jim; I’ll sit up.*” Said the robin to the sparrow, “*I would really like to know why these anxious human beings rush about and hurry so.*” Said the sparrow to the robin, “*I think that it must be, that they have no Heavenly Father, such as cares for you and me.*”

Worry can weigh us down, and like an anchor, anxiety can cause us to sink spiritually. Even worse, stress can strangle us. That’s the picture Jesus paints in Matthew 13:22: “*As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.*” If you’re sinking with stress today, follow the clear teaching of 1 Peter 5:7: “*Casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.*”

In your journey to joy, remember you have a choice to rejoice.

We’re told to not be anxious, but we’re also given something to replace the attitude of anxiety. That leads to three actions to demonstrate.

Actions to Demonstrate

1. Pray about everything. The path to inner peace passes through prayer. Look at the second part of Philippians 4:6: “*...**But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.***” One paraphrase captures it this way: “*Make your petitions known. Pray to God for what concerns you, what troubles you, what you desire, but in everything, give thanks.*”

Our lives are to be saturated with prayer. One pastor put it this way: “*Pray so much that worry has to take a number and stand in line.*” Let’s look at these four different words that are closely related and yet distinct.

- **Prayer.** This is the general word for how we humbly approach God and is related to adoration and worship. To pray means to focus on the character of God by worshiping Him for who He is and for what He does. It's amazing how meditating on the magnitude and majesty of God will put your problems into their proper perspective.
- **Supplication.** This word refers to the earnest sharing of our problems and needs. If you're worried or anxious, let God know what is pulling you in different directions. Spell out what is strangling you. Put to words what is wiping you out.
- **Thanksgiving.** We're to enter His presence with "*thanksgiving,*" being careful to have an attitude of gratitude for what God has already done for us. Thankfulness helps us keep our problems in perspective. One professional said it like this, "*It is a fact of neurology that the brain cannot be in a state of appreciation and a state of fear at the same time.*"
- **Requests.** When we make a request, we are asking God's direct help regarding our specific needs. We're encouraging everyone to invite someone to one of our four Awe of Easter services and then to put their names or initials on the vinyl prayer wall in the south lobby. I've invited 11 people so far and hope to invite at least 10 more. The staff and deacons will be praying for these individuals during our meetings on Tuesday. We're also offering the Awe of Easter Prayer Initiative to mobilize people to pray 24/7 from 6:00 a.m. Monday, April 14 through 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, April 15. You can partner with us by signing up for a 15-minute time slot. About a fourth of the slots are already taken (I took the 6:00 a.m. ones since I'm already up eating cheese curds anyway). There are eight specific requests on the app and website.

Someone has referred to our anxieties as "unspoken prayer requests" which are just waiting for us to bring before the Lord.

We could say it like this:

*Be anxious for nothing.
Be thankful you have anything.
Pray about everything.*

2. Prepare your mind. Full disclosure: *What I'm about to say is easy for me to preach but hard for me to practice.* Some of us are strangled by stress because we've been allowing our minds to focus on things that bring us down. Wrong thinking leads to wrong feelings which can lead to wrong living. Conversely, right thinking leads to right living. What we put into our minds determines what comes out in our attitudes and actions. What we believe determines how we behave.

Nelson Price tells of 15 prominent university professors who responded to the challenge to condense all the books they had studied on human behavior. They came up with this summary statement: *"What the mind attends to, it considers; what the mind does not attend to, it dismisses, what the mind attends to continually, it believes, what the mind believes, it eventually does."*

This week, I reached out to two Edgewood members who serve as Christian counselors in our community. I wanted to get their insight into how our thoughts affect our attitudes and actions. Here's what I sent them: *"Since 1 in 5 Americans deal with acute anxiety and over 30% have had struggles with being anxious, I don't want to give pat answers. But I also see how important it is to think about what we think about."*

I came across this explanation of "cognitive therapy" and wanted to get their input.

- **Catch.** Identify the thought that came before the emotion.
- **Check.** Reflect on how accurate and useful the thought is.
- **Change.** Change the thought to a more accurate or helpful one.

In commenting on this, one of them said, *"This tool can be helpful but is simplified to a point that anyone with depression or anxiety might not find it as useful. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are not so linear that we can catch a thought we had before an emotion. It's more like a bowl of spaghetti that we take one noodle out at a time to examine...the beauty of being Christian is having truth from Scripture to hold our thoughts up to and determine if there is accuracy in them."* The other counselor suggested we often have three primary irrational beliefs on repeat in our minds which cause us stress and distress.

Warren Wiersbe offers a helpful saying: *"Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny."* Proverbs 23:7 in the King James version puts it this way: ***"For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he."***

Some of us are neither joyful nor peaceful because we've been allowing our random thoughts free reign in our lives. These untrue beliefs lead us to unhealthy behavior. Studies suggest the average person has around 60,000 thoughts per day. Every day, our minds are flooded with a constant stream of thoughts, ranging from mundane daily tasks to deeper contemplations about life and the world around us. But what is truly concerning is that 75% of these thoughts are negative, and 95% are repetitive.

What kinds of thoughts have free reign in your mind? Who or what are you renting 'head space' to? Martin Luther was fond of saying, "*You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.*" You can't keep the Devil from suggesting thoughts, but you can choose not to dwell on them or act them out.

Pastor Ed often quotes Zig Ziglar: "*We all need a daily check-up from the neck up to avoid 'stinkin thinkin,' which ultimately leads to hardening of the attitudes.*" Ed also told me about a cranky grandfather was visiting his grandchildren. When he laid down to take a nap, his grandson decided to have a little fun by putting Limburger cheese on his mustache. A few minutes later, grandpa awoke with a snort, charged out of the bedroom and exclaimed, "*This room stinks!*" He went into the kitchen and said, "*This room stinks!*" He went into the living room and said, "*This room stinks!*" He finally went outside, took a deep breath and declared, "*The whole world stinks!*"

Verse 8 provides us with eight filters to keep out "stinkin thinkin" and let in only the good: "***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.***" We are to think about these eight kinds of things, which means we are to continuously ponder them in a detailed and logical manner as we marinate in their meaning. Literally it means, "*we're to keep on thinking about these things.*"

The word "***whatever***" means, "*As much as, or a great quantity*" and is repeated six times. With each occurrence, the circle of appreciation grows. God has packed a lot of good into His world and we need to fill our minds with that which is praiseworthy by being deliberate about what we allow ourselves to think about. Just as good food is necessary for our body's health, good thoughts are necessary for spiritual health.

When I read through this list, it struck me that each of these words describe the Scripture and our Savior. As I read it again, I smiled when I realized these qualities also describe my sweet bride, Beth.

Let me suggest some practical ways to deliberately let your mind dwell on the positive:

- **Fill your mind with the Bible.** We do this by reading it daily, memorizing it, and meditating upon its truths.
- **Gather on a regular basis with God's people.** This past week, I watched an interview with NASA astronaut Butch Wilmore, who was stranded in space for nine months with fellow astronaut Suni Williams. As an elder in his church, he called people from the Space Station to pray for them before they had surgery. The interviewer asked, *"I heard you were still attending your church services from space. Can you tell me a bit about why that was important for you to do?"* I loved his answer: *"The Word of God...I need it...to tie in and to worship with my church family was vital. I mean, it's part of what makes me go...part of what I need, as a believer in Jesus Christ...even though it's fellowship from afar."*
- **Regularly expose yourself to things that reflect the goodness of God.**
- **Listen to Moody Radio (89.3).**
- **Watch what you watch when you're streaming or watching videos.**
- **Think about what you think about.** 2 Corinthians 10:5 says: *"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."* It matters what we meditate on in our minds.

I've learned a lot about how to do this from Roger Hafner. Roger and his wife Donna are in our Growth Group. I'll let him share in his own words: *"I have always struggled with insecurities and Donna purchased a book for me that talked about capturing thoughts and it really changed my thought life...I ask Christ if the thought I am having is from Him...it was hard initially to take all my thoughts captive...it's amazing how [it] became easier over time, and what Christ can do in eliminating thoughts of fear, anxiety, [and] insecurities...and then ultimately direct...healthy thoughts...of handling life (marriage, church, family, work, etc.)."*

Brothers and sisters, settle this truth: *What you ponder, you will practice.* It was Descartes who said, “*I think, therefore I am.*” The Apostle Paul would say, “*I think, therefore I do.*”

3. Practice what you know. Most of us don’t need more information; we need more application, which leads to transformation. If we want peace, we can’t be passive about it. Look at verse 9: “***What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.***”

This makes me think of something Shiela Kuriscak shared with the staff this past Tuesday as she encouraged each of us to be involved in the ministry of discipleship by cultivating three relationships.

- **Mentor.** This is someone who pours into you. Who’s your Paul?
- **Peer.** This involves mutual encouragement. Who’s your Barnabas?
- **Apprentice.** This is someone you are pouring into. Who’s your Timothy?

Friend, are you putting into practice what you’ve learned and received and heard and seen in those who are following the steps of Jesus? Remember the words of Jesus in John 13:17: “***If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.***”

In your journey to joy, remember you have a choice to rejoice.

Two Assurances

We’re called to cultivate the attitudes of joy and gentleness while jettisoning anxiety. We’re to put things into action by praying about everything, preparing our minds, and practicing what we know. When we do, we’re given two assurances.

1. The Peace of God will protect us. Once we present our requests to God, His peace will come flooding into our lives. Let’s circle back to verse 7: “***And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***” I want you to notice that it’s God’s peace and only He can give it to us. God rules and reigns and doesn’t fret. Spurgeon says, “*God is unruffled.*” One author writes that to have God’s peace is to have “*the same level of tranquility that God himself has.*”

This peace “*surpasses all understanding*” which means that it goes way beyond all that we can even ask or imagine; it excels and surpasses everything we could have hoped for. We can’t put it into words, because it literally means, “*that which rises above the mind.*” We can’t explain it, but we can experience it. Isaiah 26:3 echoes this truth: “*You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.*” When our minds focus on the right things, God’s perfect peace keeps us steady.

The word “*guard*” is a military term meaning to protect a camp or castle. Remember, Paul was chained to a guard and Phillippi was guarded by a Roman battalion to protect it from attack. Our heads and hearts are battle zones and therefore need protection. When God’s peace floods our lives, it will protect our valuable hearts from wrong feelings and our strategic minds from wrong thoughts. This is good news because much of our anxiety is based on lies. The enemy is unable to get in when God’s peace protects us. 1 Peter 1:5: “*Who by God’s power are being guarded through faith...*”

Many years ago, Beth and I became friends with a couple from Sudan. Victor told us that in Sudan, everyone can tell who the Christians are because of the peace that is evident on their faces. In fact, he told me it is so clear that you can see it from the pictures that appear in the obituaries. Even before reading the eulogy, he can tell if the person was a Christian. I wonder if the same can be said of American Christians.

2. The God of Peace will be present with us. We can have the peace of God because the God of peace is with us. Look at verse 9: “*And the God of peace will be with you.*” As I’ve been praying for someone in need, I pulled these two passages together to form a prayer. Perhaps you’ll find it encouraging in your situation: “*May the peace of God continue to guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus as you rest in the presence of the God of peace.*” Warren Wiersbe writes, “*With the peace of God to guard us and the God of peace to guide us – why worry?*”

You’ve probably noticed that I left out one of the most important phrases in this passage. Let’s circle back to the end of verse 5: “*The Lord is at hand.*”

This is either a reference to space or time or both.

- **The Lord is close by, not far away.** Psalm 145:18 declares that the ***“Lord is near to all who call on Him.”***
- **The Lord is coming soon.** Because the Lord’s return could happen at anytime, we should not allow anxiety to control us or conflict to crater us. James 5:8-9 says, ***“You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.”*** If you want to go deeper into this, pick up a copy of our booklet called, “Ready or Not.”

In closing, remember these two truths.

- If you want to be at peace *with* God, you must be saved.
- If you want the peace *of* God, you must be surrendered.

You can’t experience the peace of God if you are living in disobedience to the God of peace. As we celebrate communion, let’s remember that the Lord is nearby. Because Christ is near, we can be joyful always, we can be gentle with everyone, and we can jettison anxiety. And since He’s coming back soon, let’s pray about everything, prepare our minds, and practice what we know to be true so we can have the peace of God, while knowing that the God of peace is with us.

Communion

1 Corinthians 11:28 says we’re not to take communion flippantly: ***“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”*** The bread represents His body, and the cup is a reminder of His blood which paid the ransom price for our forgiveness and freedom.

Confession/Prayer Time

We practice open communion, which means you don’t need to be an Edgewood member to participate, but you do need to be a born-again believer.

Our deacons and pastors will distribute the trays by passing them down each row. When the tray comes to you, simply lift a cup straight out. You’ll notice there are two cups stacked together. Give a little twist and hold one in each hand until everyone is served so we can partake together.

BTW, all the bread is gluten free, and we use grape juice instead of wine.

Distribution of Elements

Forever family, before we take the bread, let's focus on these words from 1 Corinthians 11:23-24: ***“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, He broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”***

Before we drink from the cup, consider these words from 1 Corinthians 11:25-26: ***“In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”***

Benediction

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26)