

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:4–7

LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand that the gospel, the good news, is the gospel of peace.
2. To understand better how to access and live within God's peace for our inner person.
3. To understand better how to be instruments of God's peace in the community of believers.
4. To understand better how to be instruments of God's peace in the world.

REFLECTION

Perhaps few words are so overused, and so sought after, as the word "peace." It even has its own sign, often seen on VW's and little girl's t-shirts. This study is focusing on the mission of God and how we, as his church, participate in that mission. Peace, perfect peace ... how fleeting has that been in our world? In our church? In our family? In our soul? And yet that is what God has tried to give us through Jesus: "I leave you my peace; I do not give as the world gives." Paul begins this chapter by addressing a lack of peace: "I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord ... help these women." For the mission of God to succeed in his church, we must have peace within our minds, peace within our walls, and be persons of peace outside those walls. It must go in that order. A peaceless person cannot render a peaceful church or a peaceful world.

I would encourage us to reflect on the state of peace-less-ness. How can the mission of God be seen in a Christian who has no inner peace, who is riddled with worry, anger, derision, or lack of contentment? How can a church carry out the mission of God when strife marks its inner workings? How can the world learn peace from us; it is so broken and we are broken alongside them? Peacelessness is everywhere. Anxiety, divorce, fear, greed, anger, depression, conflict, war, violence—these affect all of us, Christian or not, and they affect the church. Paul knows this. He has discovered the secret of being content, and attempts to share it with the Philippians and with us. God’s mission cannot be accomplished without peace. Peace is a vital and essential quality of a believer who is able to carry out the mission of God, and it is essential to a church seeking to change the world for Christ.

Merriam Webster defines peace as the following:

Freedom from disturbance

Quiet, tranquility

Freedom from war and violence

Freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts and emotions

A state of harmony or mutual accord

Note the use of the phrase “freedom.” Peace means freedom. And that is good news to all of us who have found ourselves despairing how to break free from the chains of inner turmoil, insomnia, conflict in our homes, and the daily deluge of world chaos.

Gaining peace is a little like getting thin. If it was easy, everyone would do it. And yet so few do. Why? How do we attain this peace, multiply this peace, and project this peace?

As stated earlier, our text today begins with a conflict in Philippians 4:2. Paul pleads with two good women to agree. These are women who had striven at his side and were mighty women of the faith. Clearly they are in conflict. Even more, he pleads with the other believers to help them. It’s not a lot to go on, but it is two small verses that represent conflict resolution in the church. First, *plead*. This implies a deep request, an emotional appeal—not a demand. Second, *appeal*. It is an appeal to the good and

common ground in the parties. They are both believers, committed and faithful. Third, *help them*. Do not let them duke it out in isolation. Peacemakers are called to intervene. Peacemakers are people of calm, people of wisdom, people of discernment—not people who stir up the pot, or who take a side. Our church needs people in the ministry of peacemaking, who possess these gifts, and who are willing to boldly use their gifts to help bring conflict to resolution.

Next, we have in Philippians 4:4 one of the most famous scriptures of the New Testament. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” This is a command. Paul repeats the command to rejoice often in his letters; this is not unique. He sees this as an essential practice of a believer. In some ways it can come across like a parent shouting at his kids when they melt down at Disneyland: “I paid a whole lot of money for us to do this so you better have fun or else!” What does the imperative to rejoice really mean? Is it a reflection of a state of happiness, or a natural outpouring of a heart that is already glad, full of joy? I am excited, so I jump and holler for joy? Sometimes rejoicing comes spontaneously, out of a glad and grateful heart, over some wonderful experience. But what does this imperative do for a person or a church in a state of peacelessness—which is our natural state? How do we obey this command when nothing within is glad, when everything without is falling apart around us? Paul is certainly using the term “rejoice” as a discipline, not a reflected state of emotional bliss. Rejoicing is an act of trust, of praise, and of declaration of the goodness of God that leads to a state of greater joy and peace, not an act that merely stems from such a state. Consider how the writer of Hebrews phrases it in 13:15: “Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name.” Rejoicing is what David did so well. He lamented, yes. But he always reflected back to God his praise, his thanks, and his faith that God was faithful. Perhaps when things are hardest, that is when it is most necessary to offer the sacrifice of rejoicing. Consider the prophet Habakkuk: “Though the fig tree does not bud ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord” (Habakkuk 3:17–18). Often, rejoicing is a sacrifice. Yet it leads to peace, and it can be done whether we stand in torment or in bliss. Christ defeated the torment, and stands ready to open the door to joy. Rejoicing and praising God is the key to opening that door.

“Let your gentleness be known to all; the Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5). This verse points us to the mission of extending a peaceful way to others. Our gentleness is an outward reflection of inner peace. The Lord is near. This might represent the coming of the Lord, or his spiritual nearness to all who call upon his name. Perhaps it signifies his Spirit. Peace and gentleness are both, after all, fruits of the Spirit. Only by that Spirit can we rejoice when angry, and act in a gentle manner when we have been stirred to some dark emotion. Indeed, the Lord is near.

In Philippians 4:6–7 we have another impossible imperative: “Do not be anxious about anything,” Paul urges. In the place of anxiety, he continues, present your requests to God through prayer and petition with thanksgiving. How can a human being possibly not be anxious about anything? Paul’s subsequent words are the answer to that question: in *everything*, pray, ask, and give thanks. This is the “how” to the impossible command. Do not be anxious implies a state of being, of roosting in the anxiety, dwelling there. Any moment an anxious thought assaults us, we are to pray over it. We are to take it to God. We are to ask for his help. We are then to give thanks. Lots and lots of thanks is the remedy to anxiety. Let us understand this is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, and a growing edge for many of us. We are assured that if we will do our part, if we will indeed pray, ask, and express our thanks, that Christ’s own peace which he promised to leave us in John 14 will *guard* our hearts and minds. It will build a wall of strong protection around us. How this works is an act of God; it is not something we accomplish through our own willpower. And it is not always instant. But we are assured of God’s goodness and grace. When we are in disquiet, when we have no freedom, when we are writhing on God’s hand rather than resting there, we are to express the sacrifice of rejoicing, we are to pray, we are to ask God for our needs, and we are to give thanks. And then we wait. “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the Living. Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord” (Psalm 34:13–4).

In Philippians 4:8–9 Paul gives his readers even more tools by which to attain the peace that can transform within. He addresses the mind. The greatest battles of the world are fought within the mind, and the darkest prisons also lie within the mind. Our thoughts dictate our beliefs, our actions, and our faith. When our thoughts betray us, our peace is lost. And so here Paul directs our thoughts. Whatever is true, noble, right, pure,

lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy—*think on these things*. Really set your mind on them. Exercise the mind to focus on these qualities, generating lists of true things in your children, noble things in your spouse, right things in your church, and so forth. Like rejoicing, this is a discipline. It is training our attention so that we can take our thoughts captive and tune in to the presence of God in every situation. If we deliberately turn our attention away from ignoble thoughts, false thoughts, unworthy thoughts, and determine to think on the praiseworthy thoughts and put them into practice, then we are assured that “the God of peace will be with you” (v. 9). This is how we achieve freedom from bondage and how we are healed with peace.

Finally, in the second portion of Philippians 4, Paul confides to his readers his own secret of contentment. He has learned this secret: the ability to be at peace *no matter the circumstance*. Note the list of trials: he has been in need, in want, hungry. If you know Paul’s personal story, and that he writes this letter from prison, you know his trials were many. He learned this secret along the way, just as we do. Paul did not begin as a person of peace, or as a man who promoted God’s mission in the world. He began as a person of conflict and violence. But he learned the secret which we all seek along the way. We can take comfort in that journey, in the process of it all. And what is the secret? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” This same Christ stands to strengthen us as well. In verse 19, Paul leaves his readers with a profound promise: “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” The last key to peace, and to freedom, is trusting the God who is revealed in this verse—the God who meets all our needs. Not just some, but all. Trust is the final mechanism by which our hearts and minds are guarded, and herein we can experience the peace the world cannot give.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage
 - a. Begin by asking the quick definition of peace from your group. Write down their responses. Consider asking for definitions according to the world, then according to Scripture. Offer up the dictionary definition in the discussion above, and solicit reactions.

- b. Introduce the concept of peace being fundamental to the mission of God—that the gospel message is a message ultimately of peace between humanity and God, brought through Jesus Christ. Introduce the concept that peace is an inward and outward process: peace within the believer, peace within the church, peace outside the church. Consider offering that the natural person is without peace, but the redeemed person, in Christ, has access to peace, and can participate in the gospel of peace for the sake of the world. The question remains: how does a redeemed person address the problem of peacelessness?

2. Involve

- a. Ask the group to describe peacelessness. Elaborate further, and ask what the effect of peacelessness is on the individual, on the church, and on the world? Ask what the effect of peacelessness is having on the mission of God.
- b. Ask the group for reasons why peace is not easy to access, attain, or feel. What are the barriers to peace? Ask for the group's perspectives on how peaceful most Christians and churches are.
- c. Begin reflecting on the sections of Philippians as provided above:
 - i. Discuss the conflict in the church between the two women. Ask the group to reflect on this conflict and how Paul is offering a way for that conflict to be solved (vv. 2–4).
 - ii. Begin the discussion of the term “rejoice” and how it leads to peace. Have the class describe what it means to rejoice. Ask the group to provide examples of the sacrifice of praise, and of how rejoicing might have led them to peace (vv. 4–5).
 - iii. Discuss Paul's injunction, “Do not be anxious about anything.” Ask the group to address how this is possible, what their own experiences have been, and what Paul says about it (vv. 6–7).
 - iv. Introduce the concept of winning the battle of the mind. Offer up the imagery of the mind as a battlefield of good and evil, peace and despair depending on our thoughts. We can choose what we focus our attention upon, and Paul commands us to focus our mind in a specific direction in order to have peace. When our mind is

being assaulted by anxiety, when it is simply flying away from us, how can these verses anchor us back into the peace of Christ? Allow the group to offer examples of this truth. Consider asking them to shout out true things, noble things, excellent things, and so forth. Make a quick list (vv. 8–9).

- v. Introduce the concept that peace is a process of growth, that it takes time. Paul's life testifies to this. He *learned* to be content; it was not an instantaneous gift or magical occurrence. Discuss the "secret of contentment." Ask the group what this secret is. Ask for testimony of their own experiences of learning this secret for themselves.
- vi. Finally, ask for one word that is the antidote to peacelessness: offer up "trust" as the word to consider.

3. Challenge

- a. This week, what practical steps can we take to move from peacelessness to peace? How did this class today help us gain insight into that process? How does that transformation help us make a difference in our church and in our world?
- b. Close by reading verse 19: "And my God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Challenge the class with the concept of trust. Ask if they really believe this verse. Will they decide to trust in the God who is revealed in this text. Will they allow that trust to flourish into a peace that can change a life, and hopefully other lives as well.
- c. Consider sharing some of the quotes and scriptures listed below.
 - i. "When you find peace within yourself you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others." (Anne Frank)
 - ii. "Peace cannot be kept by force, it can only be achieved by understanding." (Albert Einstein)
 - iii. "Peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal." (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

- iv. "It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it." (Eleanor Roosevelt)
- v. "I was once asked why I don't participate in anti-war rallies. I said that I will never do that, but as soon as you have a pro-peace rally, I'll be there." (Mother Teresa)
- vi. "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." (Psalm 34:4)
- vii. "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other." (Psalm 85:10)
- viii. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:11)
- ix. "Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior." (Habakkuk 3:17-18)
- x. "In God I trust, I will not be afraid." (Psalm 56:4)

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