



Philippians

Lesson 7: Living in the Peace of God

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Doctrinal Focus: Responding to Christ’s humility as servant and authority as Lord, his gifts of righteousness and heavenly citizenship, and our privilege to share his sufferings and resurrection power, Christians must stand firm, pursue peace, combat worry through prayer, and ponder and practice the Savior’s virtues, reflected in leaders like Paul.

Read Philippians 4:1-9.

Paul had issued sharp warnings against Judaizers whose legalistic teaching contradicted the gospel of God’s grace (Philippians 3:2-11) and against antinomians whose pleasure-driven lifestyle contradicted the gospel’s power to change hearts (Philippians 3:18-19). He had called the Philippian believers to imitate his own pursuit of the consummation of salvation in resurrection, when Jesus returns from heaven (Philippians 3:12-17, 20-21). At this point he began to draw his epistle to a close with a series of instructions for the Philippians’ attitudes and relationships with each other and with those outside the church. Paul closed other epistles with collections of exhortations as well (Romans 16:17-20; 1 Corinthians 16:12-18; Colossians 4:2-6; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22).

Here his directives covered a range of responses that should flow from faith in the gospel: stand firm (Philippians 4:1), agree in the Lord (Philippians 4:2-3), rejoice (Philippians 4:4), be reasonable (Philippians 4:5), pray (Philippians 4:6-7), contemplate virtues (Philippians 4:8), and practice what Paul conveyed in his words and his example (Philippians 4:9). The theme of *God’s peace* ties them together, implicitly or explicitly (see especially Philippians 4:7, 9).

As Paul’s thoughts turned away from those who

opposed the cross and back to the Philippian believers themselves, the warmth of his affection for them overflowed in a torrent of terms of endearment (Philippians 4:1). They were his brothers and sisters, belonging to one family by the gracious adoption of one heavenly Father. Twice in this brief sentence he affirmed that he loved them. Since they were separated by many miles (and by Paul’s chains), he longed for them, as he had said earlier (Philippians 1:8). Their own messenger Epaphroditus was also longing to return to them (Philippians 2:26). They were his *joy*, for in their unity Paul’s joy would be completed (Philippians 2:2). Moreover, they were his *crown*¹—the victory wreath that Paul looked forward to receiving at the finish line because their firm grip on the word of life showed that Paul had not run in vain (Philippians 2:16).

Paul showered the Philippians with these expressions of his affection not only because they were a welcome contrast to those who grieved Paul (Philippians 3:2, 18), but also because he wanted to reassure them of his deep love before exhorting two treasured co-workers to pursue peace with each other (Philippians 4:2).

Paul’s first two commands (Philippians 4:1-3) returned to themes that he had introduced in

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Philippians 1:27-2:4. Now he charged them again to “stand firm in the Lord.” Paul’s “Therefore” and “thus” link this summons to steadfastness to his preceding contrast between earthly-minded enemies of the cross and the heavenly citizenship of believers: because our identity is defined by heaven and heaven’s Lord, believers must resist the pressure to conform to the corrupting values of the present age (see Romans 12:2). Paul had written that he wanted to hear that they were “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27). Now he would gently couch his correction to Euodia and Syntyche in an affirmation that they had labored “side by side” with him in the gospel (Philippians 1:27). As soldiers serving in Christ’s army, they must cultivate and defend their solidarity as comrades-in-arms.

Earlier Paul had shown that Christian unity is preserved when each places others’ concerns above his or her own, “being of the same mind” in mutual love (Philippians 2:2). Now he must address Euodia and Syntyche by name with an urgent entreaty to “agree in the Lord.” Perhaps the trend toward self-centeredness that Paul previously corrected in general terms (Philippians 1:15-18; 2:1-4) found its focal point in friction between these women.

Paul taught that, according to God’s creation design, men are to be the church’s official leaders as elders and pastors (1 Timothy 2:8-3:7); but he also honored the ministries of many women (Romans 16:1-4, 6-7, 12, 13, 15), teaching that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to every believer to serve others (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:4-8). Here, though, he found it necessary to entreat Euodia and Syntyche to be reconciled but, at the same time, he also honored them as his co-laborers and fellow-soldiers.

Suspecting that his sisters’ peacemaking might need aid from a third party, Paul asked his “true companion” to help them. The identity of this “genuine yokefellow” (the Greek metaphor pictures a pair of oxen pulling together) must have been known to the Philippians, but it is unclear to us. Perhaps he was one of the overseers greeted in Philippians 1:1. The gospel for which Euodia and Syntyche had stood courageously with Paul would teach them the humility not only to ask and grant

forgiveness, but also to accept a pastor’s help in mending their relationship.

These women, Clement, and all of Paul’s fellow-workers (in fact, all believers in Christ) could take heart from the fact that their “names are in the book of life.” That book, mentioned in various ways throughout the Bible (for example, Exodus 32:32; Isa. 4:3; Daniel 12:1; Luke 10:20; Hebrews 12:23), belongs to the Lamb who was slain to redeem those whose names are inscribed in it (Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15). It is a picture of God’s sovereign grace in choosing individuals—in spite of our sin and foolishness—to receive salvation through his grace alone, in Christ alone, by the Spirit’s gift of faith alone.

Paul’s third command in this section echoed his previous call to “rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 3:1) and his even earlier invitation to share his joy amid suffering (Philippians 2:17-18; see 1:18). Paul was repetitive without apology (see Philippians 3:1), issuing the summons to rejoice twice in quick succession. He knew the transforming power of Christ-centered rejoicing for Christians in suffering or in conflict. Joy that seeks its source “in the Lord” rather than in the circumstances of daily experience can weather the storms of suffering and give grace to submit our own priorities and perspectives to the needs of others.

God’s electing grace (represented in the book of life) and their joy in the Lord would do more than grant to Euodia and Syntyche the humility to be reconciled to each other. These gifts of God should also motivate the whole congregation to respond gently to those outside the church: “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone” (Philippians 4:5). The term here translated “reasonableness” could also be rendered “gentleness,” since elsewhere Paul contrasts it to violence and quarrelsomeness (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 3:2) and associates it with Christ’s meekness (2 Corinthians 10:1). Such gentleness in the face of opposition is anything but weak. The indwelling Spirit of Christ gives believers the strength to respond to attacks not with retaliation but with restraint and even kindness, as Paul wrote to the Romans: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it

depends on you, live peaceably with all. . . . If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Romans 12:17-20).

Another reason that the Philippians could be patient and gentle in response to present opposition was that *"the Lord is near."* They were awaiting the return of their Savior from heaven, the site of their citizenship (Philippians 3:20); and they had God's promise that Jesus' coming would bring salvation to them and destruction to their persecutors (Philippians 1:28). Although the time of his coming was not theirs to know (Mark 13:32), they could be sure that their Redeemer would not be slow in keeping his promise to come again (2 Peter 3:8-10). Paul's concise reminder, *"The Lord is near,"* compactly carried the message that James spoke more fully: *"Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. . . . behold, the Judge is standing at the door"* (James 5:7-8). Although 2,000 years have passed since Paul and James spoke these promises, we can be sure that, when Jesus appears, the perspective of eternity will show that he has not delayed but brought justice to his elect *"speedily"* (Luke 18:6-7).

The humility and gentleness that foster interpersonal peace between believers (Philippians 4:2-3) and with *"everyone"* (Philippians 4:5) cannot thrive in hearts torn apart by anxiety over present problems or future threats. Therefore, Paul went on to ban worry, to command prayer, and to promise the protection of the peace of God (Philippians 4:6-7). Jesus had shown his followers how foolish they would be to worry over food or clothing when their heavenly Father values them more highly than the birds he amply feeds and the flowers he sumptuously clothes (Matthew 6:25-34). Here Paul echoed Jesus' *"do not be anxious,"* and prescribed the remedy to anxiety: taking every need and concern to our rich and generous Father in *"prayer and supplication with thanksgiving."* The insertion of thanksgiving among their requests would keep them conscious of the gifts that God had already showered upon them in Christ, preventing their prayers from degenerating into litanies of self-pity or whiny demands. (Paul had shown them how to blend thanks with request in Philippians 1:3-11.)

Paul attached a great promise to the practice of

thankful prayer: *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* He had illustrated from his own experience that those who can say, *"To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,"* can see opportunities to exalt their Savior in dangers and deprivation that would plunge others into fear or depression (Philippians 1:20-21). Since Christians' chief aim, the glory of Christ, could be achieved either by life or by death, *"in plenty and hunger, abundance and need"* (Philippians 4:12), the protection they most need is not from assaults on the body but from anxiety in the soul. Paul picked up a term familiar to military veterans to assure his friends that God's peace would *"guard"* their hearts from invasion by unsettling fears. God's promise is not merely that their every petition will be granted, but—far better!—that his peace will guard their hearts and minds from worry whether they received what they requested or not. This power to calm fearful hearts, whatever the external situation, is what makes God's peace *"surpass all understanding."* One scholar observes, *"God's peace transcends our intellectual powers precisely because believers experience it when it is unexpected, in circumstances that make it appear impossible: Paul suffering in prison, the Philippians threatened by quarrels within and enemies without"* (Silva 2005, p.196).

Finally, Paul concluded with commands to fill their minds with all that is true, good, and beautiful, and then to let that healthy mental diet—which they had heard in Paul's gospel and seen in his life—transform their behavior. The list of virtues on which believers are to think—whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy—has parallels with lists of qualities commended by moral philosophers of the ancient Greco-Roman world, and most appear in Jewish sources as attributes worthy of imitation. Three of these terms (*"lovely"* and *"commendable,"* and *"excellence"*) do not seem to belong to his normal vocabulary, since he never used them elsewhere. Clearly, though, by God's common grace even non-believers recognize integrity when they see it. In commending these virtues as worthy of contemplation, then, Paul was restating his instruction to the believers at Rome: *"Give thought to what is honorable in the sight of*

all" (Romans 12:17). Of course, he also expected his Christian readers to see each of these qualities as transformed by the mercy and majesty of Christ, so they were not *merely* the best of (earthbound) standards that Roman citizens could imagine. They were qualities befitting the citizens of heaven because they were reflective of heaven's King.

Paul knew that what people let their minds dwell upon gradually transforms their values and their affections. Then, from the heart's treasury, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34-36) and actions proceed. Therefore Paul called the citizens of heaven to saturate their minds with truth, beauty, integrity, and other virtues that deserve attention and admiration because they display the perfections of God himself.

Lest his list seem too generic or abstract, Paul brought it into sharp focus by anchoring it in his preaching and his personal example: "*what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me.*" It was in Paul's proclamation of Christ—his divine glory, condescension to servanthood, selfless death on a cross, and exaltation by the Father—that the Philippians would find the apex of truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, excellence, and praiseworthiness. Wherever these virtues are found, even in flawed, creaturely examples, they

merit our meditation and imitation. But they radiate most brightly from the Christ who is proclaimed in the gospel, for it is there that we see "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ,*" and so "*are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*" (2 Corinthians 4:6; 3:18).

Paul had closed his call to thankful prayer with the promise of protection by *the peace of God*. Now he closed his call to ponder and practice Christ's perfections with the promise of the presence of *the God of peace*. He called God by this title in benedictions (1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Cor. 13:11; Romans 15:33), but also in contexts where *a congregation's peace was threatened by dissension* (1 Corinthians 14:33; 2 Thessalonians 3:16; Romans 16:20). As the Philippians focused their thoughts on Jesus and adjusted their behavior to the model that they had seen in Paul, the Lord himself would bring them not only internal, individual peace of mind (replacing anxiety) but also interpersonal, congregational peace (replacing selfish ambition and hurt feelings). These believers, like those in Colossae, must "*let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body*" (Colossians 3:15).

Cited Works

Silva, Moisés (2005). *Philippians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament). 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Notes

1. "Crown" (*stephanos*) in this context refers not to a royal headcovering of precious metal but to the laurel wreath awarded to those who won competitions in the ancient Olympics, which began in Achaia to the south of Macedonia but were well known throughout the Greek-speaking world. See 1 Corinthians 9:25: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath (*stephanos*), but we an imperishable."

Recommended Commentary

Philippians by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



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Philippians 4:1-9

Philippians Lesson 7

Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 4:1-9.

1. Paul's "*Therefore*" and "*thus*" in Philippians 4:1 link the commands in this passage with truths that he had already discussed. What are those truths, and how do they lay the foundation for the directions that Paul now gave for believers' attitudes, relationships, and beliefs?
2. Read Romans 12:1-21 and Ephesians 4:1-6. Note that again "therefore" links the truth that Paul had taught earlier with his commands for Christians' conduct. Why is it vital to keep that "link" in mind as we read God's directions for our attitudes and actions? What can happen to our relation to the Lord and to others if we forget that link?
3. In Philippians 1:27-28 the command to "*stand firm*" came in the context of threats from outside opponents that might tempt Christians to fear. In Philippians 4:1 the command to "*stand firm*" follows a context that includes other threats from outside (see 3:2, 18-19). Besides refusing to be intimidated by overt persecution, what other dangers must Christians resist as we "*stand firm*"?
4. Although Paul found it necessary to exhort Euodia and Syntyche by name, how did he "cushion the blow" of his correction to them? Why, do you suppose, he found it necessary to correct them publicly in this letter?
5. Read Luke 10:17-22. Why does Jesus tell us that our deepest joy is to be found, *not* in the fruit that we seek from our ministry, *but* in the fact that "your names are written in heaven?" How can the truth that your name is in "the (Lamb's) book of life" (Philippians 4:3) *encourage* you when ministry is frustrating and *humble* you when ministry is fruitful?

6. Although we often assume that our emotions are beyond our control, Paul *commands* us—repeatedly!—to “*rejoice in the Lord always.*” Reread Philippians 1:15-21 and 2:17-18. On what things did Paul focus his thoughts and desires? How did that deliberate focus of his heart and mind give him joy amid miserable circumstances? What can you learn from Paul about harnessing your own emotional life to your identity in Christ, and so finding joy “*in the Lord*” in all situations?

7. Although Paul and Jesus commanded us not to worry, a few New Testament passages speak of “anxiety” or “worry” (Greek *merimnaō*, usually translated “concern,” since Christians are not supposed to worry!) in a positive light. Read Philippians 2:20 and 2 Corinthians 11:28. What was the focus of Timothy’s and Paul’s “concern”/“anxiety,” and how does it show a shift of focus from what we naturally worry about (as Jesus diagnosed our anxious hearts, Matthew 6:25-33)?

8. How does blending thanksgiving with our requests make our prayer life more effective as an antidote to self-centered anxiety? Read the prayer of the church in response to the threats of the Jewish Council (Acts 4:23-30). What did they mention to God first? When did they bring up the problem? What was their request, in light of the problem? What can we learn from their priorities in prayer?

9. Is having our hearts protected from worry by God’s peace similar to the “apathy” that the Stoics cultivated by intellectual self-discipline, persuading themselves not to care about the events and persons in their everyday experience? Why or why not?

10. How should Paul’s list of things to think about in Philippians 4:8 influence what we choose to read or entertain ourselves in our leisure time?

11. Paul here connected *pondering* with *practicing*: “think about these things” with “practice these things.” Why is it important that our thinking about the beauties of Christ leads to change in the way we live and relate to others? Why is it important that our efforts to change our behavior be grounded in our meditation on Christ and what he has done for us? What is lost when we miss the connection between *pondering* and *practicing*?