

St. Paul spoke with a sense of zeal and passion about his experiences living the Christian life. He made it sound like one great adventure. Where did that enthusiasm come from and is it something we can share? We're going to talk about that this morning and what it might have to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul opened this passage with the exclamation, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (v.4)** He sounds like a man standing on the edge of the sea, exclaiming the awesomeness of God over a crashing surf.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

But we know he was writing his letter from prison, where he was often cold and hungry and alone.

Nonetheless, he writes, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”**

Have you ever had a mountain top experience? You know, one of those special times when you felt like you had risen above the anxiety, the fears, the dark things of this world. You felt at peace with your life. You may've had such an experience in church, or with your family, or at your job; you may have been on the beach or even on an actual mountain top. Whatever the setting was, you realized what mattered the most was not where you were but how you felt.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Please say it with me:
(**“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”**)

The word **“rejoice”** is a spiritual word, a Christian word. It’s related to “shalom,” that is, God’s peace, the peace God himself lives in. God is whole and he has a perfect sense of well-being. That’s what “shalom” is. To “rejoice” means to live in this peace, this wholeness, and to show other people that you’re happy about it!

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

This is a command, but why? It sounds like such a good idea, to rejoice. But historically, in the church, “joy” has not always been the intentional, outward expression of the Christian. Perhaps you have memories of a stern pastor who carried the proverbial big stick, or church ladies with long faces, or an elder who seemed to be just a little too judgmental.

We need Paul’s command to **“rejoice”** because, number one, our old, unredeemed nature too easily bubbles back to the surface and takes over our heart, and number two, our minds and hearts often become overwhelmed with the demands of the world.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

When Paul was transformed from a legalistic teacher of the law to a grace-filled follower of Jesus, everything in his world was turned upside-down. Property, reputation, and money – the things the world says give life meaning – meant nothing to him anymore. What sustained him, what gave his life purpose was his internal transformation from a mere man into a man after God’s own heart.

Paul wrote, **“Let your gentleness be evident to all” (v.5a)**. This is his second command; he wants us to be gentle. This one’s a little easier to get a handle on, to understand. We know the difference between being gentle and being harsh; we can see it in our mind’s eye. But it is no easier to do than to rejoice.

Every day I’m on campus I see the little ones from the preschool—3, 4, and 5 year olds. One little guy boasts that he’s going to be 5. He is filled with anticipation for what this might mean! Another one shows me his owie. I ask him if he is going to

be okay, and he assures me he will be, laughs, and runs off to join his friends to play. Such encounters provoke gentleness. It's easy with the little ones.

On the other hand, there's that guy who always wants to argue with me about politics, or about religion, or about how I spend my money. It's not so easy to be gentle with him. It's 9 o'clock in the evening, and on the way home, I go to Stater Brothers to pick up a loaf of bread. There's only one open checkout line, and a woman with a cart filled to overflowing sees me coming and literally runs to beat me to the line. It's not easy to be gentle with someone like this.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all.”

To be gentle with people we don't like and with people who irritate us, is another distinctly Christian virtue. By that I mean, we can only obey this command because of Jesus in me. Please say it with me: (Jesus in me.)

Paul wrote, **“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near” (v.5).**

Indeed, the Spirit of the Living God is in our minds and in our hearts. He knows our very thoughts, our weaknesses, and our temptations. And he saves us.

“The Lord is near.”

We find him especially close to us in the man Jesus, who, Paul explained earlier, **“being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.... And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-11)**

“The Lord is near.”

He rejoices in our salvation, for he is our Father in Heaven, and like a parent who finds joy in his child's every breath, so too he rejoices in you.

And he is gentle. We slip and fall. But he's there to brush us off and set us on our journey again. We become angry and we rebel against his commands, but he does not turn away. He surrounds us with his angels, and he guards us from the enemy, and when we return to him, he receives us with open arms.

Paul did not distinguish in his own life between what he believed and how he lived. But he always made the connection between his internal response to God's grace – that is, it's awesome! And I'm thankful for it! – and his actions, how he lived his life, and how he treated other people.

A person who is outwardly righteous but does not rejoice in his heart, is only religious. For there is not relationship with God himself. But consider King David who wrote in Psalm 64, **"The righteous man will be glad in the LORD and will take refuge in Him; And all the upright in heart will glory"** (Psalm 64:10). Gladness and glory are things which pour from a person's spirit; they're a response to something godly, holy, awesome, and true. God saved David, and he saved Paul, and he poured his grace down on us and saved us too that we might follow him with joy and gladness, that we might glory in our own hearts for all that he has done and has promised to do.

Paul continued his exhortation, writing, **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God"** (v.6). What's the cure for anxiety? According to Paul, gratitude and thanksgiving. My simple, non-psychology explanation is this: When we are thanking God for our lives, our experiences, our relationships – good or bad – in our families, our work, and our church, we are trusting the Lord. And when we trust the Lord, we're not worrying, we don't have time for anxious thoughts.

Someone else wrote that "a lack of gratitude is the first step to idolatry," which is to say, if we are not thankful for who we are and what we've got, we're giving God the one finger salute, and we're looking for someone or something else to fulfill our desires.

Some people question the relevance of the Bible today because "it's so old" or because of the ancient, patriarchal culture in which it was written. But Paul closed this section, writing, **"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"** (v.7).

These words just might be the most relevant and powerful words for our world today. People are searching for answers; they're afraid; they're angry.

And they are not going to find what they're looking for in the next presidential election regardless who they vote for or who wins! For a fact, I know there'll never be any election at any time that satisfies anyone's thirst for the truth ever.

But people search, nonetheless. They search for peace; they want to experience joy in their hearts. And it's right here at this altar where we pray with gratitude, where God's peace, God's shalom – his own wholeness and sense of well-being – sweeps over us, and into us, and transforms our hearts – our sense of identity – and our minds – our every thought, and we are born again as children of God.

And we are filled with a new kind of joy – a gladness of supernatural origins – and our expressions of affection for other people are changed from suspicion into appreciation, and our hard attitudes towards the world become a gentleness for the people who live with us here, people who need Jesus.

This is why a person should believe in Jesus: Freedom and transformation; the stripping away of all our anxieties as we learn to trust our Lord to be our God. Therein is **“the peace of God, which transcends all understanding (which) will guard (your) hearts and (your) minds in Christ Jesus.”** Friends in Christ, this is God's gift to us; this is our gift to our community.

This week may all your anxious thoughts melt away as you rejoice in your life in the Lord Jesus.

This week may you have opportunity to live this joy, giving thanks to God for all things.

And this week may you have opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.