

“Don't Worry.....”
A Sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
Reverend Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.
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Philippians 4:1-9
Philippians 4:10-23

Philippians 4

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. ²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know

what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. ¹⁵You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. ²¹Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. ²²All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. ²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

I. Introduction

Today, my series on Paul's letter to the Philippian Christians comes to an end, and it does so by covering the last chapter of this short letter. For many Christian readers of the New Testament, this final chapter is the most important chapter in Paul's letter. Why is that? Because Paul's normal strategy when he corresponds with churches is to divide his letter into two different parts. The first part tends to be longer and to talk about the "why" of his theology, while the second part tends to be shorter and to talk about the "so what" of his theology. The "why" part is where Paul explains and describes what is true about the Christian faith; the "so

what” part is where Paul draws out the moral and ethical implications of our faith and how our theology should inform our day to day lives.

So this morning, we pivot to the “so what” section of Philippians. Remember that in chapter 3, Paul just spent a fair amount of time talking about the past that he regards as rubbish and loss (3:7-8a) in the context of knowing Jesus as his Lord (3:8b) and reminding us of the future in which we will share in the glory of the risen Savior (3:12-14). But that leaves unaddressed the question of how we navigate this present time. We’ve dumped our past in the trash can, and we can look forward to our future with Jesus, but we still live in the present. Won’t that be a problem? And how might that work out? That is what Paul will address in this chapter.

II. Pivot to Philippians

(**slide2**) The first verse of Philippians 4 reads, “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for (ἀγαπητοὶ καὶ ἐπιπόθητοι [only here in the GNT]), my joy and crown (χαρὰ καὶ στέφανός μου), stand firm (στήκετε) in the Lord in this way, my beloved (ἀγαπητοί).” Notice again the highly affectionate and intimate language Paul uses to describe the Philippians:

“whom I love and long for” (the NRSV has converted passive adjectives into active verbs; a more literal translation would be “my brothers and sisters, beloved and longed for” [see, e.g., BDAG via Bibleworks 10: “pert. to one who is dearly loved, dear, beloved, prized, valued” and “pert. to being earnestly desired, longed for, desired,” respectively, and compare the passive translation “beloved” at the end of the verse]), “my joy and crown,” and “my beloved.” Paul knows, just like we do, that “no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” And his first exhortation to his beloved audience is to “stand firm in the Lord.” The command to “stand firm” occurs six other times in Paul’s epistles (1 Cor 16:13; 2 Cor 1:24; Gal 5:1; Eph 6:13; 1 Thess 3:8; 2 Thess 2:15), but only here and in 1 Thess 3:8 (ὅτι νῦν ζῶμεν ἐὰν ὑμεῖς στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ) is his

audience to stand firm “in the Lord.” In both cases, standing firm has to do with steadfast perseverance (O’Brien, NIGTC, 476-77) on the part of the Christian community, both individually and as a church family. My former Greek professor, Gerry Hawthorne, puts it this way: Paul is describing the duty of Christians to stand firm “as [if they were] soldiers who are to stand at their post irrespective of the pressures to abandon it (cf 1:16), or as runners who must adhere without deviation to the course marked out by the gospel” (Hawthorne, WBC, 178). What Paul does not have in mind here is a stubborn unwillingness to give an inch about your particular theological beliefs. Instead, we have to look back to his words in chapters 1 and 2 to have the same mind, the same love, the same spirit, the same attitude as the Jesus who did not consider equality with God as something to be hoarded but who emptied himself and became a servant. Our steadfast perseverance, then, has to do with our continued willingness to model the character and the ministry of Jesus *even in the midst of our disagreements and our conflicts*. That's an important message for the church today because one of the worst things about the contemporary church is its misguided focus on theological and ethical purity, a focus matched in the secular world by the grades given to political candidates by the NRA or the NARAL, grades which presume that without 100% devotion to and support of the freedom of unfettered access to guns and to abortions, respectively, a candidate must be rejected or voted out of office. I am a Second Amendment advocate who does not believe that everyone everywhere should have unfettered access to any kind of firearm that can be purchased. I am also a supporter of a woman's right to choose who believes that when a child can survive outside of the womb - about the 28th week of pregnancy - that the state has the right to intervene and take the unborn child as a ward of the state if the mother does not wish to carry it to term. But whether you

agree or disagree with me on these two views, Paul's exhortation to us is to be steadfast in love, steadfast in service, never giving up on the Christian family, and by doing so to keep on modeling in our lives the sacrifice that Jesus made when he gave up his divine privilege to become a lowly human. I can serve you if you disagree with me about the reach and extent of the second amendment. And I can serve with you if you disagree with me about my pro-choice stance. But if I choose to ignore or dismiss you in your time of need, or if I choose not to serve with you because we don't see eye to eye on issues like these, then I am not in alignment with Paul's instruction to the church.

(**slide3**) Paul gives us an example of this in verses 2-3. Two women in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, were apparently having some kind of conflict, and Paul “urges” (Εὐδοσίαν παρακαλῶ καὶ Συντύχην παρακαλῶ; note that the verbal form παρακαλῶ is repeated twice, after each named individual; Hawthorne WBC rev ed 241 suggests that “Paul uses it twice so as to heighten its effect by repetition, as though he were addressing the women each in turn, and to emphasis that his apostolic exhortation is made to both parties equally”; see, similarly, Vincent ICC 131 [“The repetition of the word emphasises the separate exhortation to each”]) them to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” But notice that he doesn’t limit his exhortation to these two people. He asks “my loyal companion” to “help these women.” We don’t know for sure whether “my loyal companion” is referring to a particularly close colleague in ministry with Paul or whether the word “companion” is really the proper name of an actual person named Suzuge. What we do know for sure is that whoever this individual might be, he or she is being asked to “help” (συλλαμβάνου) these women. Luke 5 tells the story of a time when Simon Peter and his friends went fishing at night and didn’t catch anything until Jesus told them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat. When they did what Jesus told them to do, they actually caught some fish! How much fish? So much fish that their boats began to sink. And what did they do next?

They did what you or I or anyone else would do: “they signaled their partner in the other boats to come and **help** (συλλαβέσθαι) them” (Luke 5:7). So keep that image in mind if you are wondering what it means to help someone. Our job as Christians is to help a fellow believer who is struggling with a load they cannot manage themselves, with a task that seems too formidable for them, with conflicts that seem too fraught to manage, whenever they need help.

Paul then moves to what may be his most famous passage in Philippians, verses 4-9. This passage contains four different imperatives: **rejoice** (Χαίρετε) in the Lord; let your **gentleness** (τὸ ἐπιεικὲς) be known to all; **don’t worry** (μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε) about anything; and then **think** (λογίζεσθε) about specific kinds of things.

(**slide4**) Paul’s command to “rejoice in the Lord” is one we encounter elsewhere in the NT. Jesus tells his disciples to “rejoice” when we are persecuted for our faith (Matt 5:12). In Philippians itself, the church in Philippi is given the imperative to rejoice along with Paul even though he is in jail when he writes, “But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me” (Phil 2:17-18). It isn’t an accident that both of these commands come in a context in which life has taken a downward turn. A former pastor of mine once told me that it’s hardest to have faith when you need faith the most. In the same way, it’s hardest to rejoice when rejoicing is hard. We know that Paul spent about two years in a Roman jail, and in Philippians 2, Paul is describing his time in jail as “being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith” (Phil 2:17) Commentators aren’t sure as to whether Paul is referring, obliquely, to what he thinks is his impending death (see, e.g.,

Holloway, *Hermeneia* 136-37, “The reference is to Paul’s possible execution, which Paul interprets positively as a sacrificial libation,”

Loh-Nida, *Handbook* 74, “When used of a person, the verb denotes a violent or bloody death,” and O’Brien, *NIGTC* 305 “a reference

to Paul's death is preferable") or if this is just a reference to his personal suffering as an apostle of the Risen Savior throughout his lifetime (see, e.g., Hawthorne, WBC rev ed, 149 "Therefore, when Paul uses the libation metaphor, ... he is picturesquely referring to his sufferings as an apostle"). But whether Paul is referring to a death he fears is just around the corner or to the suffering that has marked his years of devotion to Jesus doesn't really matter. No matter what his distress is, he instructs the Philippian Christians to "rejoice in the Lord" three separate times in this 4-chapter letter. Paul will similarly remind the church in Thessalonica to "rejoice always" (Πάντοτε χαίρετε, 1 Thess 5:16). So Paul and Jesus aren't talking about some kind of philosophical denialism about the seriousness or the reality of suffering. The command to rejoice reflects instead a quiet confidence that no matter what is happening to us now, God will set things right eventually. It is a recognition that our present sufferings, our present hardships, our present struggles are but a blip in the face of the eternity we will spend with God.

(slide5) Our capacity to "rejoice in the Lord always" is a convenient segue into the next exhortation, which is to "let your gentleness (τὸ ἐπιεικὲς) be known to everyone." That word "gentleness" is a difficult one, in part because it is rare within the pages of the NT (only here and in 1 Tim 3:3; Tit 3:2; Jam 3:17; 1 Peter 2:18). Its meaning can be inferred from the negative language used in Titus 3:2, which tells us "to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, *to be gentle*, and to show courtesy to everyone," and in 1 Tim 3:3, which tells us to be "not violent *but gentle*, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money." Positively, James associates gentleness with a willingness to yield, with being full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. Hence, most commentators describe the gentleness invoked by Paul with definitions like "do not make a rigorous and obstinate stand for what is your just due" (Vincent, ICC 133) or "a

spirit or attitude that does not seek to retaliate.... one's willingness to give and take instead of always standing rigidly on one's rights" (Loh-Nida, *Handbook* 128). They use words like "gentle forbearance" (Fee, *NICNT* 406-07) or "magnanimity" (Hawthorne, *WBC* rev ed, 244). But again, it all boils down to the same thing: our willingness to model "the character of Jesus," (so Hawthorne citing Caird [WBC rev ed 244]), our willingness to give up what could be claimed as rightfully belonging to us or what we could rightly demand of other because of the greater good that is at stake. And what is that greater good? That would be the greater good of serving others, of creating harmony within the community, of standing with one mind, with one love, and in one service to all God's children. That latter part is emphasized by Paul's reference "to everyone" at the end of the verse. That is a dramatic departure from most of his other epistles where he almost always discusses how things need to be within the church itself. Here, those boundaries are exploded; our gentle magnanimity is not limited to our relationships within our church family but must be known, must be made manifest to everyone (πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις), "not to your fellow-Christians only" (Vincent, *ICC* 133).

(slide6) The last two items in this section of Philippians are, I am sure, not unfamiliar to us. The third item "Don't worry about anything" (μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε, perhaps better and more colloquially translated, "Don't worry about nothing") is reminiscent of Jesus' teaching "do not worry (μεριμνᾶτε) about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Luke 12:22-23 || Matt 6:25, 28). If you are anything like me, you spend way more time than you want to admit worrying about things in this life. Paul's antidote to worry is prayer: "Don't worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And the

consequence of choosing prayer over worry? “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Finally, the fourth item, “Whatever is true (ἀληθῆ), whatever is honorable (σεμνά; see also 1 Tim 3:8, 11; Tit 2:2), whatever is just (δίκαια), whatever is pure (ἀγνά; see also 2 Cor 7:11; 11:2; 1 Ti 5:33; Tit 2:5), whatever is pleasing (προσφιλῆ; only here in the GNT), whatever is commendable (εὐφημα; only here in the GNT), if there is any excellence (ἀρετῇ; only here in Paul and elsewhere in the GNT only at 1 Pet 2:9; 2 Pet 1:3, 5) and if there is anything worthy of praise (ἔπαινος; see also Rom 2:29; 13:3; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 8:18; Eph 1:6, 12, 14; Phil 1:11), think about these things” (Phil. 4:8) reminds us that we should pay as much attention to our mental diets as we do to our physical diets. When I am grocery shopping, I see people studying the nutritional information on boxes and agonizing about whether they should buy the organic version or not, whether they should buy almond milk or soy milk, whether they should keep the cheddar cheese and sour cream potato chips and that 5-gallon drum of ice cream in their carts or not. But I rarely see people agonizing over what they watch on TV, what they see on social media, where they get their information about current events, about theology and ethics and moral behavior. And yet for Paul, what we feed our minds is just as important - perhaps more so - than what we feed our bodies.

III. Pivot to Today

(slide7) These instructions of Paul may seem counter-cultural to us today, but the good news for us is that they combine to give us guidelines of how we are to manage ourselves in this lifetime. The first guideline has to do with our shared sense of service, our shared sense of purpose, and our shared sense of community that needs to rise above the disagreements that we may have. One of the values that seems to be missing in the church these days is captured by

the saying, "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, diversity. In all things, charity." The saying is often attributed to St. Augustine, but church historians haven't yet found that saying in any of his writings. But whether he said it or not, it definitely encapsulates the counsel that Paul gives the church. Perhaps the clearest example of this is in Romans 14-15, where disagreements over which days are holy, which seasons are sacred, and which foods can be eaten are subordinated to the command, "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them" (Romans 14:3). We can substitute just about anything we want for "those who eat" and "those who abstain" because eating and abstaining from eating represent two different sides of the same issue. But whatever the issue is, those who believe in or support issue A must not despise those who don't, and those who don't believe in or support issue A must not pass judgment on those who do, for God has welcomed them both. Instead of constant conflict, can we be gentle with everyone, including both the members of the church family and those outside these walls? That's Paul's first guideline for us this morning.

(**slide8**) The second guideline for us has to do with our mental perspective on life. Paul is relentlessly positive despite being in the very difficult circumstance of being in jail in Rome. How do we model his call to rejoice in the Lord always? How can we obey the call to "not worry about anything"? Yesterday, station KHOU in Houston, TX reported that there are roughly 30 thousand tons of food sitting in warehouses in Houston, food that is "intended to ship to international destinations" ([Thousands of tons of food aid stuck in Houston warehouses due to Trump's pause on USAID](#), accessed 8 Feb 2025). I will admit to you all that I do worry about the people overseas who need these supplies and won't get them for however long they are holed up in Houston, and I'm

having a hard time rejoicing over that situation. I am sure that some of my Bethel students who were born in this country to undocumented parents are concerned that their parents might be discovered, detained, and deported. Some of them may have heard rumors about the revocation of birthright citizenship, which if enacted might directly affect them. I doubt that these students are rejoicing and I am confident that they are worried. Heather Pierini has posted a request on social media asking if people are willing to make monthly contributions to Food is Free Bay Area because they are concerned about a potential cut in funding which would negatively impact their ability to distribute food to those who need it in Solano County. It wouldn't surprise me if Heather is worried and not rejoicing, and it wouldn't surprise me if the people that her organization serves are in a similar state of mind. In these kinds of situations, it can be difficult for an attitude of thanksgiving and rejoicing to take priority over an attitude of worrying. And in Romans 12, Paul admits that rejoicing 100% of the time is impossible, because he counsels the Roman Christians to rejoice with those who rejoice, and *to weep with those who weep* (Rom 12:15; compare 1 Cor 12:26, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" and Sirach 7:34, "Do not avoid those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn").

Obviously, there will be times when we will weep or suffer or mourn. We aren't called to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that everything is all hunky-dory when it's not. But the more and the more often we can prioritize gratitude and rejoicing over worry and weeping, the more we will be in alignment with Paul's exhortation to the Philippian church.

(slide9) The third guideline is the one I mentioned earlier about verse 8: to watch what we feed our minds. Are we feeding our minds what is true? what is honorable? what is just? what is pure? what is pleasing? what is commendable? what is worthy of praise? I will admit

that starting in 2016 and continuing ever since that time, I had to stop watching the news on TV even though I've always been a news junkie since the days I watched Walter Cronkite deliver the news on CBS back in the 1960s. I now try to stay informed about current events by reading newspapers and consulting websites I think are politically neutral and objective, but for the last several years, watching the news on TV has not filled my mind with what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent or worthy of praise. Following Paul's dictums here will require us to apply critical thinking skills because something isn't true just because we hear it on the news. Something isn't true just because it's posted on social media. Something isn't honorable just because someone says it is. Something isn't worthy of praise just because someone does something. We are not called to be passive imbibers of the information we get. Obeying Jesus' command to "love the Lord your God with all your mind" will allow us to focus on the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise.

(slide10) In verses 9-13, Paul tells us what the result will be if we follow his counsel. In verse 9 he tells us, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you." And then in verses 11b-13 he reminds us that because of his various life circumstances, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

So let's let the God of peace be with us all, and let's do all things - even the hard things - through the God who strengthens all of us. Hallelujah. And Amen.