

Paul's Letter to the Philippians:
An Epistle of Joy, #13

"Personal Peace or the Peace of God?
(Phil. 4:2-9)

--CEFC 11/2/19
cf. NEFC 11/9/86

When I ask people how they are doing,

I can't tell you how often I hear

"Oh, I'm really stressed out right now."

Stress is a dis-ease that plagues our culture,

perhaps especially in the fast-paced world we live in here in this area.

It is as common as a cold in winter.

And that stress can come from all sorts of sources—

Commonly it is stress at work—

deadlines to meet, bosses to please, problems to solve—

Can I ever get it all done?

And there are stresses at home—

Toddlers making messes

and teenagers, well, teenagers just being teenagers,

and marriage relationships frazzled and on edge.

There are stresses at school—

with teachers piling on homework
and so-called Facebook “friends” turning against you.

There is the financial stress of just trying to make ends meet this month,
after you discover that your car needs a new transmission.

And there are the stresses of serious medical issues--
either your own or a loved one—like a child or a parent.
It’s tough.

And those are just personal issues—
throw in the bigger problems of our national political polarization,
racial tensions,
or the threats of terrorist violence,
and it just gets worse.

Yes, there is a lot to worry about—

[project image #1—man with anxious thoughts]

Life is full of stress-ers.

I was talking to Kevin Gottlieb on Friday about some of the stresses in his life.

We talked about how stress produces anxiety,
and when we are anxious,
we go into “survival mode”—and we become self-focussed.

Our thoughts become turned in on ourselves,
and we lack empathy and compassion,
patience and consideration of others.

Our relationships suffer as we live with a short fuse
that can sometimes detonate an emotional explosion.

We feel stress and anxiety, and we are robbed of joy,
and what we long for is peace—
just give me some peace.

And there are lots people out there with advice on how to get that peace—

[project image #2—person meditating]

My Google search for “finding peace” came up with some interesting results--

First there was “**3 Ways to Achieve Inner Peace**”

Then I saw

How to Find Peace of Mind in **4** Simple Steps

Then I noticed “**5** Simple Ways to Increase Your Peace of Mind,”

and I began to see a pattern.

I saw “8 Things to Do If You Want to Be at Peace with Yourself”

Then, “9 Powerful Ways to Find Peace of Mind “

and, you might have guessed it,--

“10 Ways to Get Peace of Mind.”

Then “13 Steps to Inner **Peace** (Even In A Busy Stressful World)”

There’s, “How to Find Inner Peace: 15 Things You Can Start Doing Today”

and finally, “40 Ways to Achieve Peace of Mind and Inner Calm”

And if that seems too overwhelming,

you might like this site--

“How to Stop Overthinking Everything and Find Peace of Mind.”

Some of the ways to peace of mind included:

“Worry less”—OK. But that is the whole point!

“Resist guilt”—though nothing about not doing the things
that cause you to feel guilty.

As a dog lover, I like this one: “Play with a pet.”

[show image #3—Meditating dog

And then there was “Be True to You.”

[show image #4—True to You

That last one most struck me,

because so often in these kinds of self-help advice pieces,
the path to peace is inward.

One quote I found captures this idea.

“Withdraw yourself from the never ending masquerade of life,”

writes Alison Stormwolf.

“Go within,
there you will find your treasure.”

People often think of the road to peace as one of withdrawal and escape—
and especially an escape within ourselves.

[project image #5—Exit sign]

This morning, we consider a different approach.

We’ll look at the words of a writer who knows a lot about stress,
and who lives in the midst of it,
but who has discovered a source of peace and joy outside himself,
a peace that transcends all human understanding.

In a world full of stress, anxiety, and conflict,

we need to hear the inspired words of Paul the Apostle
from his letter to the Philippians
so that we might find the peace of God.

Please turn with me to Philippians 4.

This theme of peace is introduced by a situation of conflict—

Phil. 4:2—“I plead with Euodia

and I plead with Syntyche

to agree with each other in the Lord.”

Evidently, two women in their church were at odds with one another.

Perhaps they differed on the style of music in their worship,

maybe they disagreed on the magistrate’s plan

to build a wall around the city,

or maybe they were debating various views on the millennium.

We don’t know—Paul doesn’t tell us.

But apparently, it was not something of critical doctrinal or moral importance,

because Paul doesn’t take sides.

Instead, he urges them “to agree with each other in the Lord.”

I think a better translation here is “**to be like-minded,**”

for it’s the same expression Paul used back in chap. 2, v. 2,

when he urged all the believers there

to “**make my joy complete by being like-minded,**

having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”

You don't have to agree on everything to be like-minded.

But their "**like-mindedness**" is not something they discover within themselves.

No, Paul urges them to look outside themselves—

the mindset they must share,

which will enable them to live in peace despite their differences,

is a way of thinking found "**in the Lord.**"

In other words, it is to come in their understanding of who they are in Christ,

as they share the mind of Christ—

Jesus Christ—who, though he existed in the form of God,

took on our humanity,

and, in humility, he sought the welfare of others above his own,

becoming obedient to the Father to the point of death,

even death on a cross.

His was a mindset that did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

Rather, in humility he valued others above himself,

not looking to his own interests but to the interests of the others.

That's the mindset Paul urges these two women to make their own—

that's the way that they can work out their differences,

that's where their peace will come from.

Paul goes on to call on another member of the church—we don't know who—

to help as a mediator in this dispute.

That's often a helpful tool when conflicts arise.

v. 3—"Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow

[also translated as "*my true companion*"],

help these women who have contended at my side
in the cause of the gospel,
along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers,
whose names are in the book of life.”

Notice that Paul’s strategy as a peacemaker in this situation

is to help these two women to put their conflict into a broader perspective.

They were to be “**like-minded in the Lord**”—

and two additional aspects of that mindset are alluded to here.

First, they should remember their common cause.

“Euodia and Syntyche—quit fighting with each other!

Don’t you see you are on the same team.

You both have “**contended at my side in the cause of the gospel.**”

These women had been in the trenches with Paul.

We don’t know exactly what that entailed,

but it was surely significant work—

sharing the gospel message with people,

contending for its truth,

perhaps under the threat of severe persecution,

and helping to see the gospel work itself out in this church.

“That cause—the cause of Christ—

is bigger than whatever may be dividing you,” Paul says.

Let your common cause be a part of your mindset

as you deal with this contentious issue.

The cause of the gospel is too important

to allow your personal differences to hinder its advancement.

Remember your common cause,

and we must do the same.

And to add to that,

Paul would have them **remember their common destiny:**

You are both those “**whose names are in the book of life.**”

You both have been accepted by God;

you are both members of God’s own family;

you are going to be spending eternity together in the praise of our great Savior,

so don’t let some secondary issue come between you./

In your conflict with each other, take a moment to look **up**—

put your disagreement into a bigger picture—

be “**like-minded in the Lord.**”

That’s Paul’s path to peace in this church squabble. /

And let’s be realistic—

there will always be disagreements among Christians;

and there will always be some conflict in the church;

but here Paul is providing a means of working through that conflict

by maintaining a unified Christ-like mindset in the midst of it.

And we a church would do well to do the same

when we encounter the inevitable disagreements in our midst.

More harm is done to the gospel

by the intra-church bickering of short-sighted Christians

than by the attacks from the outside by militant atheists.

We must cherish peace within the church family,

and we must work hard to maintain it--

a peace that transcends differences

and allows conflict to be dealt with constructively,

so that disagreements don't result in divisions among us.

Let's help one another share this mindset of Christ,

and may **"the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts,**

since as members of one body [we] were called to peace" (Col. 3:15).

From seeking peace in this local church situation,

Paul broadens his remarks in vv.4-9,

giving a series of exhortations.

Some see these as an unconnected collection,

tacked onto the end of the letter as a collage of closing comments.

And that may be the case,

but it seems to me that Paul continues a common theme

as he moves from peace within the church

to the peace of the church as it moves out into the world.

Paul speaks in vv. 4-7 of gaining the peace of God

and then in vv. 8,9 of walking with the God of peace.

Vv. 4-7 have to be some of the best known and most loved in the entire letter,

as they end with this glorious promise that God's peace,

which transcends all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

There are four things Paul tells us to do in these four verses,

and all have a bearing on that final promise.

All four of these reflect one great reality—a reality not within us, but outside of us—

They all point to our understanding of God and our relationship with him.

They represent four points at which theology intersects life.

First, in v. 4, Paul urges us to be **joyful**:

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

Now, Paul is not simply saying, "Cheer up, things aren't so bad",

or "Put on a good face, things will get better."

or practice positive thinking.

It goes far deeper than that.

The appeal is not to your attitude but to your theology—

Your joy is not found within, but without—

"Rejoice in the Lord," he says.

Paul is reminding us that our greatest joy as human beings,
as those made in the image of God,
is to know and to love the God who made us.

God himself is a rich reservoir of love that flows out into his world—
supremely in the sending of his **Son** into the world
and the sending of the **Spirit** into our hearts,
bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else.

He is the Author of our every satisfaction;

He is the source of all goodness, truth, and beauty.

And in the gospel he has reached out to us in love to draw us to himself.

We find our deepest happiness in our relationship with him.

I think of the words of our call to worship—

Isaiah 61:10—"I delight greatly in the LORD;

my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation

and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,

as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,

and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

This is profound truth--now let it touch your life—

"Rejoice in knowing this God," Paul says.

You will find peace if you let the Lord be your life's focal point;

find your joy in him,

not in your circumstances.

Paul's own life demonstrates this.

Surely the Philippians had all heard the story of Paul and Silas

during their first visit to the city when they were locked up in their city jail
with their feet in the stocks.

and they were **"praying and singing hymns to God"**

throughout the night (Acts 16:25).

That was Paul rejoicing in the Lord, despite his circumstances.

And even now he was writing this letter to them with joy from a Roman prison.

Peter testifies to the same reality—as he writes to his fellow believers--

"Though you have not seen him, you love him;

and even though you do not see him now,

you believe in him

and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1Pet. 1:8).

If your joy in life is dependent on your circumstances

you will be disappointed.

There was lots of joy in that Nationals locker room on Wednesday night—

they were champions--

but in just four months they've got to start all over and do it again.

You may have great joy in your children—

but they will grow up and move out.

You may have great joy in your job—

but what happens if you lose your job

or what happens when you retire?

You may have great joy in a friendship or a marriage—

but you or they are going to die.

And let me tell you,

don't put all your joy in your favorite team,

they will surely disappoint you!

Only a relationship with the living God can last forever—

only a joy based in knowing him will endure into eternity—

It will never end.

"Rejoice in the Lord always,"

for in him you will always have something to rejoice about.

"I will say it again: Rejoice!"

Now don't expect this joy to come instantaneously or automatically.

Joy is fruit of the Spirit,

and like any fruit it emerges when the tree is cared for

and is cultivated in spite of inclement weather, bugs, weeds, and poor soil.

Joy as a way of living is a hard-won victory

over entrenched attitudes of apathy, pessimism,

doubt, unbelief, and despair.

It is a victory of sublime theological truth

combined with vibrant spiritual experience

overcoming the mundane and muddy affairs of life.

Even in tragedy, it allows you to say, "It is well with my soul."

Fundamentally it comes down to your view of God—

Have you seen him in all his wondrous beauty and glory,

so that to know him is joy unspeakable?

I occasionally get a taste of that joy,
and when I do, I want more of it, for there is nothing like it.

Be joyful, Paul says, rejoice **in the Lord!**

That's the first step to experiencing God's peace in a troubled world.

Then in v.5 Paul urges us to **be gentle**--

"Let your gentleness be evident to all."

Don't let this word "**gentleness**" conjure up an image

of someone handling fine china or small babies.

That's not what Paul has in mind.

The Greek word here refers to a moral quality—

It is sometimes translated as a forbearing spirit, fairmindedness, or graciousness.

It is contrasted with being harsh, inconsiderate, or rude.

It is a willingness to forgo retaliation in the face of threat or provocation.

It is merciful, it is forgiving, it is humble.

It is a word Paul uses to describe the character of Jesus (2 Cor. 10:1).¹

And, Paul says, it should characterize our relationships with everyone—

even the most intimidating of people,

the most inconsiderate of people,

even the pushiest people.

It is the gentleness that resists the temptation to say "I told you so";

¹ 2Cor. 10:1—"By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you . . ."

it goes the second mile;

it turns the other cheek.

It is a quality that seeks, as far as is possible with you,

to be at peace with all people.

This “**gentleness**” that Paul speaks of is not easy,

especially when people can be so irritating.

I confess a particular irritation I feel when I get stuck in a long line

of very slow-moving traffic,

and someone from behind pulls onto the shoulder of the road,

drives to the head of the line and then expects someone to let them in.

It drives me crazy,

but I suppose there just might be a case for showing gentleness and forbearance

by not standing on my rights in situations like that.

A trivial example, perhaps,

but if our faith doesn't make a difference in the little things,

I am afraid it won't make a difference at all.

It is this quality of “**gentleness**” that fosters peace,

both in our relationships with others

and within ourselves. /

But notice what Paul says immediately after this command,

which reinforces this command—

Paul again points outside ourselves to the Lord.

"Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The Lord is near.

"The Lord is near" –

This "nearness" can be taken in two senses, and both are relevant.

First, it could mean that the Lord is near temporally—

in other words, his coming is near.

We have a strong and powerful champion near at hand.

He will fight our battles for us.

He will bring forth justice;

we need not always seek it for ourselves.

"Do not take revenge, my dear friends," Paul says in Rm. 12,

"but leave room for God's wrath" (12:19).

That judgment is always near.

Those people who cut in line will receive their just reward,

and it doesn't have to come from me!

But the Lord's "nearness" could also be understood spatially—

The Lord is here with us, even now.

And surely there is a reminder here that he has been gentle with us—

he has been merciful and patient and forgiving to us—

and if he is here with us, seeing what we do and how we act—

dare we not be gentle with others?

Our gentle forbearance with others will be a sign of our peace with God.

As Thomas a'Kempis said, "Thy peace shall be seen in much patience."

How true!

So be **gentle**.

Third, we see that God's peace comes to those who are **prayerful**--

v 6--"**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."

Notice here how anxiety and prayer are put in opposition to one another—

either you can be anxious or prayerful.

This contrast sheds light on both sides.

In prayer, we turn our problems over to God;

we set our future in his hands.

Our anxiety results in our insistence on holding onto these things ourselves,

bearing them exclusively on our own shoulders.

We worry about what might happen in an uncertain future.

I like Winston Churchill's comment about the old man

who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life,

most of which had never happened.

How much of our anxiety is worry about what might happen.

But again, fundamentally, this attitude reflects a faulty theology—

Have you understood the sovereignty of God,

the truth that our God rules this world?

Have you grasped that God is in control of all transpires in this universe?

Nothing ever surprises him;

nothing catches him off guard;

nothing can hinder his good purposes.

And more than that, have you understood the Fatherhood of God—

that this almighty and powerful God has adopted us into his family

through his Son Jesus Christ.

We are his own children—

shall he not care for us?

Consider the birds of the air, Jesus says,

Your Father cares for them—Are you not much more valuable than they?

The sovereign King of the universe is our heavenly Father—

Do you get that?

It is in prayer that we put this theology to work

as we lay our anxious thoughts at the foot of the cross of Christ.

In prayer we leave our uncertainty in the certain hands of our heavenly Father.

Peter puts it like this:

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

I like the words of Martin Luther in his rather blunt style:

“Pray and let God worry.”

Claim this promise—

“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.”

But notice also that Paul tells us that, as we pray, we are to **be thankful--**

“make your requests be known to God, with thanksgiving,” he says.

It's a simple thing--**thanksgiving,**

but it profoundly affects our relationship with God.

We'll talk more about this when we gather

for our Thanksgiving Communion Service in a few weeks,

but here I would just say that

until we acknowledge that we owe everything

to our God's gracious provision,

we cannot know him as we ought.

God's peace comes to those with thankful hearts,

to those who can reflect on the goodness of God,

even when some things around them may not look so good.

As someone has said, "Thanksgiving for past benefits

is the surest road to confidence in future ones."²

² Caird, Phil.

Gaining the peace of God—

it is a peace that “**transcends all understanding,**”

because it is a peace that doesn’t depend on

the logic of our circumstances.

From a human point of view—

looking only at what our secular world can comprehend,

how can we be at peace?

The world is raging all around us.

The future is uncertain,

threats to our well-being are everywhere.

From climate change to cyber-warfare to random shooters—

why should we ever be at peace?

But there is a source of peace that our secular world knows nothing of—

it is found in the God who is peace—

for our God is always at peace—

nothing can surprise him,

nothing can cause him to be anxious or afraid.

He is the sovereign King,

the loving Lord who is peace itself.

And as we put our trust in this God,

his peace will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

He will surround us with a protective shield—

not against trouble,

but against fear in the face of trouble.

This is a peace that comes from "an attitude, a disposition,
a deep, settled confidence that a loving heavenly Father
is in control of the details of your life" and of the whole world.³

Be assured, this peace is not characterized by an absence of conflict;
it doesn't come through withdrawing from the hubbub of life.

It is a serenity even in the midst of the strain and tension of modern life.

We may be assaulted every day and every hour
with threats and anxieties and worries,
but God's peace stands guard, shielding us, protecting us.

But we must understand that the peace of God
is not something we experience apart from God.

It's not something he gives to us like a drug,
which tranquilizes our frazzled spirits.

The peace of God is nothing other than an assurance of God's own presence with us—
for he himself is the God of peace.

And in the final two verses of our passage

Paul speaks of that presence of God with us with two further exhortations--
v.8—"Finally, brothers [*and sisters*],

**whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,
whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
think about such things."**

³ J. Aldrich, *Discipleship Journal*, 29 (1985): 19.

What do they say—

“Garbage in, garbage out.”

What are you filling your mind with?

Where do go for moral encouragement and inspiration?

This is a challenge in our entertainment-soaked world--

It can be hard to find stories that have redeeming characters and themes,
that lift our hearts and encourage our souls.

But there are things out there,

and I sometimes find them in sports.

I have to say there was something inspiring

about the Washington Nationals' amazing championship journey.

In mid-May, they were 19-31, having lost almost twice as many as they had won;

there was talk of firing the manager,

their odds of winning the World Series were put at 1.5%.

But they never gave up.

In the playoffs, five times they faced elimination, and in each of those games

they came from behind to win.

People often talk about the moral qualities, the virtues,

of this underdog team—

their perseverance and fortitude,

they overcame setbacks,

they had faith in each other,

they never gave up hope,

they held together as a team,

encouraging one another,

supporting one another.

There's a lot there that is admirable and worthy of praise.

It is striking as you look at this list in v. 8

that there is nothing distinctively Christian about the virtues here.

In fact, this list could just as easily have come from

some manual of Stoic moral instruction.

But make no mistake, Paul may hold up Greek virtues in v. 8,

but in v. 9 he makes it clear that "the last word

lies with distinctively Christian teaching,

learned as a lesson, received as a tradition, heard in Paul's preaching,

and seen in his example."⁴

Put common virtue in your mind,

but more importantly, **put Christian living into practice**, Paul says,

and the God of peace will be with you.

Don't expect God's peace if you are not willing to live in God's ways—

for it will always be true—

"There is no peace for the wicked" (Is. 48:22; 57:21).

Jesus said, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.**

I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27).

Jesus offers us peace, for he offers us himself;

his own life given for us on a cross

⁴ Caird, Phil.

so that we might have peace with God
and so come to know the glorious God of peace. /

Do you feel stressed out?

Does your life seem out of control?

Let me close with an illustration from T. M. Moore—

He points to one of the recurrent forms of Celtic art—

[image #6—Irish Plaitwork

“the interwoven lacework or plaitwork which you find in illuminated manuscripts,
on delicate liturgical implements,
and on the bases and along the arms of the great carved crosses.

These intricate patterns have no beginning and no end;

everything connects to everything else

and provides either a base or a border for the work of art as a whole.

The message is clear: Everything is holding together as by divine design,

so rest in the beauty and security of unfathomable divine wisdom.

It's good to meditate on the fact that God is sovereign.

He does all things well, all things according to His good pleasure,

and all things in such a way as to work them together

for the good of those who know and love Him.

When our world seems to be coming unglued,

we need the reassurance that the base and borders are firm,

knotted and woven together by the same One

Who is pleased to allow us a little unsettling,

just so we learn to refocus on His sovereign power and love.

So be at peace, my friends; there are no loose ends.”⁵

If you are a believer here this morning, be encouraged—

you can have peace in a troubled world,

for the God of peace will go with you.

Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

And if you are still seeking peace, look no further,

Open your eyes to the God of peace.

For those who seek him, the Lord is near. //

Let's pray as I invite our servers to come forward

and we prepare to come to the communion table.

Prayer

Psa. 139:23—"Search me, God, and know my heart;

test me and know my **anxious** thoughts."

John 16:33--"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.

In this world you will have trouble.

But take heart! I have overcome the world."

⁵ This comes from Moore's blog.

Psa. 94:19 “When **anxiety** was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.”

Is. 26:3 --You will keep in perfect **peace**
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.

We come now to this communion table to share in the Lord's Supper—

Here we see the promise of the gospel displayed in a visible form—

The bread and the cup—

the broken body and shed blood of Christ our Lord,

given for us to take away our sin,

which we receive afresh today

so that the life of Christ may live in us by the Spirit.

If you are a believer in Christ—

if you have professed your faith

and had that faith confirmed by God's people

then come and share in this family meal.

If you've not yet made that profession,

let these elements pass until you do—

reflect on the peace that Christ offers us

in this gift of himself.

Ask God to open your heart to his love and grace,

that you might recognize your need of a Savior.

Words of institution--

Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

An Epistle of Joy, #13

Nov. 2, 2019

"Personal Peace or the Peace of God

(Phil. 4:2-9)

In a world full of stress, anxiety, and conflict, we need to hear the words of the Apostle Paul as he points us to a peace that transcends human understanding.

I. Seeking Peace among God's People (vv. 2-3)

Remember Your Common Cause

Remember Your Common Destiny

II. Gaining the Peace of God (vv. 4-7)

Be Joyful (v. 4)

Be Gentle (v. 5)

Be Prayerful (v. 6)

Be Thankful (v.6)

III. Walking with the God of Peace (vv. 8,9)

Put Common Virtue into Your Minds (v. 8)

Put Christian Truth into Practice (v. 9)

Sermon Response

"Personal Peace or the Peace of God

(Phil. 4:2-9)

- What is causing stress in your life right now? How does stress affect you?
- What is the difference between trying to find peace within yourself and trying to find it outside yourself? What is Paul's perspective?
- How can Paul's words concerning the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche help you in dealing with the conflicts you face with other believers?
- What does it mean to find joy "in the Lord"? How can you foster joy in your relationship with God?
- How can prayer bring you peace? Have you seen this in your life? How can you find this more real in your life?
- Why is our relationship with God so critical to having peace?

•Take time to pray in your group—

Take a moment to reflect in prayer on who God is—his goodness, truth, and beauty. Find joy in him. Then spend time taking your anxious thoughts to him, seeking his peace.