

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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PRACTICE PEACE

Philippians 4:2-9

If you have ever been part of a conflict in a church family, you know how painful it can be. Churches split, friends divide, competing sides line up against one another. The little ditty seems true:

To live with the saints we love,
Oh, that will be glory
But to live below with saints we know
Well, that's another story

But church conflict brings about deep scars in the body of Christ. It damages our reputation and witness in the community. It undermines the comfort and support we can give to one another. It grieves the Lord.

In His High Priestly Prayer in John 17, Jesus prayed that His followers *would be one like He and the Father were one*. He told His disciples to *love one another*, so much so that when we come to worship and offer our gifts at the altar and remember that someone has something against us, we are to get up and leave the gift and go and be reconciled with the person with whom we are in conflict.

Jesus understood that it is difficult to worship and serve Him when you are at odds with someone else. God wants us to get along.

In Philippians 4, the apostle Paul makes a personal plea for reconciliation in the church. Look at how our passage begins:

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, to 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.

Obviously there was a problem with two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche. Since these ladies are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible it is impossible to know the nature of the problem. But we can guess what it was like in their church – groups met in corners and talked about how awful the other side was. Every conversation turned to the conflict between the two. Any little disagreement could potentially be a match that would ignite an explosion.

We know from Paul's tone, throughout his letter, that the church was affected by the conflict. At the beginning of chapter 1, he had spoken of his prayer that their love might *abound more and more* (1:9). He closed the same chapter with the admonition, *conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . . stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel* (1:27).

In chapter 2 he urged the Philippians *to be one in spirit and purpose . . . to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves (2:2-3)*. He exhorted his readers to imitate him and Timothy and Epaphroditus, who were following the example of Jesus Christ.

Here in chapter 4, Paul returns to this theme of unity. He urges both women to work at reconciliation. He doesn't lay blame. He assumes here that both may be at fault. It is crucial that we understand this. It doesn't matter what kind of conflict is taking place, we certainly have some culpability in our disagreements.

Sometimes we are to blame for our arguments, sometimes we are not. Resolving conflicts may require working through the reasons for a dispute, but practicing peace does not. Paul does not try to arbitrate between Euodia and Syntyche. He leaves that for another, a loyal yokefellow. Instead, he focuses on what you and I can do as individuals before the Lord.

As we look at the verses that follow, I want to make six observations this morning – really, six commands that Paul gives us to practice peace. These are things we can do, even if the other party in conflict doesn't.

COMMANDS TO PRACTICE PEACE

First, Paul tells us to rejoice in the Lord. He knew that when we are conscious of God's grace and mercy to us, we are less likely to be nitpicking with fellow Christians. The word "rejoice" comes from the word "joy." It is a supernatural quality, a fruit of the Spirit, produced in us only through the work of Christ in our lives.

Being joyful is not the same thing as being happy. Happiness is a virtue of the world and it comes and goes. It is external and depends on how we view our circumstances.

The old Charlie Brown cartoon defines happiness as a warm puppy. But what happens when there is no puppy? There is no happiness. Happiness depends on our circumstances – how things are going in our lives, our health or the money we have, how we feel and how we think others feel about us. When those things go, happiness goes with them.

Not so with joy. Because Christ has saved us, we can have joy that rises above our circumstances.

The apostle Peter wrote: *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, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* (1 Peter 1:8-9).

Until Christ comes back, each of us will experience conflict. We are sinners interacting with other sinners. Look around you – the people on your right and left are sinners just like you and me. All of your life, you will struggle with putting the interests of other people ahead of your

own. All of your life, you will wrestle at some level with selfishness and pride. And so will they. So, unless you avoid other people, conflict is inevitable.

The first step in practicing peace is to remind yourself of your own desperate need for salvation and take joy in the fact that you are saved. Even if you are right and the other guy is wrong, remember that you are an undeserving sinner who has offended our holy God more than any human has offended you.

Remember God's grace to you, preach the gospel to yourselves and have joy.

Next, Paul tells us to be gentle. In verse 5: *Let your gentleness be evident to all.* This is the quality that is produced by rejoicing, a Christ-like gentleness toward all people. It is power under control, the bearing of abuse or mistreatment without retaliation. One writer called this gentleness or forbearance "a humble patient steadfastness that is able to submit to injustice and abuse without hatred or malice, trusting in God in spite of it all."

That is the gentleness of Jesus Christ! Even though He was God Himself, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Instead, He humbled Himself and remained true to His mission to die on the cross. He didn't hate, He loved. He didn't pay back. As Peter wrote, *When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly* (1 Peter 2:23).

That leads us to Paul's next command. Do not be anxious about anything. Paul tells us not to worry – about anything! Easier said than done, right?

Now Paul's commands are not empty or pointless words given by someone living on easy street. He was not lounging under a palm tree sipping a cool drink and singing "Don't worry, be happy!" His circumstances were pretty tough – worse than most of us will ever deal with. In prison in Rome for preaching the gospel, awaiting a trial in which he may be set free or condemned to die, Paul is in trouble, in conflict with the Roman authorities. We also learned that while Paul was in chains, a few Christians in Rome were envious and preached the gospel out of rivalry. Paul's whole existence was difficult, dangerous, full of trouble and conflict. So, his instruction to not worry is not detached, but full of feeling.

Jesus told us the same thing. Worry is the attitude of the unbeliever, not the attitude of one who trusts in God. Jesus reminded us that the birds of the air are examples of God's provision for us. In Matthew 6:26, He said, *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?*

If you could eavesdrop on the birds, perhaps their conversation would go like John Stott imagined:

Said the robin to the sparrow
 "I should really like to know
 Why these anxious human beings
 Rush about and worry so."

Said the sparrow to the robin
 “Friend, I think that it must be
 That they have no heavenly Father
 Such as cares for you and me.”

Jesus tells us to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you (Matt 6:33). God is trustworthy!

Do not be anxious but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. The corollary to not worrying is prayer. That is Paul’s next command.

There is much we could say about this beloved passage, but we have little time. I encourage you to put Philippians 4:6-7 to memory if you haven’t already and think about what the verse says. When we are in difficult circumstances, we must pray. When things are going wrong., we should pray. When we are in conflict with other people, our first course of action should be prayer.

As we bring our requests before God – when we tell Him every possible cause for concern or anxiety – we are casting all our cares upon God. When we thank Him for however He might answer our prayers, we are declaring our absolute dependence on Him. The result is a peace that is greater than our understanding.

We may not understand the reasons for our difficulties, we may not always know “why” something happens to us or why we are in disagreement with a brother in Christ, but when we cast our cares upon Christ, a peace that transcends all rationality is ours. We rise above our circumstances, no longer lean on our own understanding, but trust in God.

I want you to notice that by telling us to pray instead of worrying, Paul is not telling us to ignore or avoid conflict. He doesn’t give us permission to run away from a dispute and act as if there were no problem. No! He tells Euodia and Syntyche to face their conflict head-on and resolve it.

But what he does say is that in order to experience peace, we have to know to whom we should bring our complaints. Look at the order here: We are to let our gentleness be known to every one, but we are to let our problems be known to God. Bear the burden of the conflict publicly, talk to God about it privately.

How do you react to conflict? Do you retaliate with unkind words? Do you complain to your friends about the way so-and-so treated you? Or do you show gentleness – forbearance – to human beings and bring your requests in prayer to God?

Friends, for most of us our tendency in conflict is to pay back insult for insult, to demand our rights, to insist on our honor. Often our first course of action is to talk to someone else about a disagreement, instead of coming to God – I know I have that problem.,

We are to acknowledge our own sin and humbly lay out our concerns before Him, with thankfulness in our hearts. If we want to practice peace, if we want to experience peace, we must start by going to the God of peace.

God's peace that rises above circumstances will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The picture is of the Roman garrison in Philippi, soldiers standing guard with the military hardware – peacekeepers like our military forces today. Our union with Christ is protected by the personal and powerful peace of God. No matter how our requests are answered, God's peace will mightily flood over those who with thanksgiving make their requests known to Him.

Here are four brief imperatives: rejoice, be gentle, do not be anxious, and pray. If these are followed, the peace of God is present. Paul goes on to tell us to embrace thought patterns and practices that will enhance this peace of God.

We are to invite the God of peace to rule our minds. Verse 8: *Finally, brothers, 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.*

This mental attitude is truly a stunning portrait of how we must think of the God of peace who controls our minds. A mind that focuses on these things not only sees Christ, His Word, and the gospel, but also rationally engages God's creation and looks for and speaks truth. He recognizes God's rule over every aspect of life and looks for whatever would be pleasing and glorifying to Him. He pushes out of his mind those thoughts that are untrue, dishonorable, impure or sinful. He leaps on the facts of God's provision and looks for answered prayer and discards the lies the evil one tells us that God doesn't care.

One lesson we can draw from this is to fill our minds and hearts with what is true and good. Read and meditate on Scripture. Reflect on God's majesty in everything that is good in our world. Develop the discipline of refusing to let your mind dwell on what is bad.

This is not simply "positive thinking," not merely casting out negative thoughts and thinking only the warm and fuzzy. Part of what is true and noble and right is the ugliness of our sin and the horror of the Cross. We are to think about those things. Instead, Paul calls us to biblical discernment. A mind that is constantly being renewed by God's Word, a heart that is joyfully refreshed by knowledge of God's saving grace and His daily provision is one that experiences the peace of God.

Proverbs 4:23 tells us, *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.* No doubt Euodia and Syntyche, while immersed in their conflict, had not been thinking the kind of thoughts Paul wants us to have.

Paul concludes the passage by asking us to follow his example, to put into practice the things we see in him. What is it about Paul that we are to emulate?

Remember that earlier in this letter, Paul makes it clear that he has not arrived at perfection. Although his deepest desire was to know Christ, to embrace His mind completely and totally

shed all reliance on himself, he isn't there yet. In fact, the longer Paul is a Christian, the more aware he is of how far he falls short.

The more Paul got to know Jesus, in all His perfection and holiness, the more he understood the majesty and glory of the Lord, the more amazed he is at God's grace in his life. That understanding equipped Paul to deal with conflict in a godly manner. Paul doesn't ask us to imitate him because his life is so squared away, because he is such a faithful and mature believer. He wants us to follow his example in admitting our sin and our need before God and in clinging to Christ as a great Savior.

CONCLUSION

Last week, we heard about the wonderful missions program of our church and how we might be engaged in reaching the world for Christ. We are a church like Philippi – strategically placed by God near our nation's capital at an important crossroad in history. We are a church that faithfully proclaims the gospel – all of us who belong to Christ stand in the historic line of Paul's fellow workers and have our names written in the book of life.

But we are like Philippi in another way. We have our family conflicts. Many of us have been in disputes with one another – I know I have. Some of those conflicts need to be worked through. But today, God's Word calls us to look to our own selves, to see how we can as individuals practice peace.

The commitment to obey the command to rejoice – to obey the command to respond with gentleness when we think we experience mistreatment, to obey the command to not worry but pray with thanksgiving and thus receive the marvelous peace of God, to think Christ's thoughts and in Paul's example, admit our sin and our need before God – will elevate the life and unity of our church and help us be an inviting haven for those around us who need Christ.

The witness of the church to the world depends on how we as individual Christians cling to the grace of Jesus Christ. James Montgomery Boice said the impact that the church has is "a little like a triangle. It has a broad base composed of many believers and many doctrines. But the impact point is the apex, the individual Christian. The individual is what the world sees." You and I are those individuals.

Peace does not depend on someone else; it is up to us. By the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must practice peace for the sake of the gospel and the glory of God.