

JOY THROUGH PEACE

Philippians 4:1-9

We could argue that “peace” is the absence of “conflicts.” Why do we have conflicts? That leads to another question: At the most basic level, what might we say is the cause of any conflict? I did a search on the internet and read there were an infinite number of areas where conflicts can arise. That didn’t help. Examples included such things as access to resources, styles, perceptions, goals, pressures, roles, personal values, unpredictable policies, personality differences, noncompliance with rules and policies, misunderstandings, competition, information conflicts, interests, relationships, and authority or power abuses.

One way to get some perspective on this subject is to recognize that conflicts are tests of what is really important to us in life. This realization might bring to mind something that James mentioned in his letter to Christian that we are “to count it all joy when we have various testings.” Our normal thinking is that we achieve joy through peace. How do we get these ideas to come together in some logical manner? James claimed that this testing of “what we really believe” (our faith) produces “endurance” (patience) that leads to “maturity” (perfection) and “fulfillment” (wanting nothing). How can all this happen considering that to err is human and we are human?

We find a key that unlocks this mystery in understanding that whatever spirit is in us will try to control how we think, what we say, and what we do. Therefore, we must submit to the Spirit of God rather than the spirit of the evil one. We have to choose to which we will submit and to which we will resist. We are to follow the example of Jesus in the wilderness temptation Who resisted and the "tempter" then departed from Him for a season which is what James confirmed in James 4:7 which reads “be subject, then, to God; stand up against the devil, and he will flee from you.”

This is essentially the same message that Paul was writing to the church at Philippi which admonished them to follow the example of those who were following Christ rather than being misled by those who “mind earthly things” rather than heavenly or eternal spiritual precepts.

Stand – 4:1

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. Philippians 4:1 (ESV)

The need to not let up and to be faithful until the end is found in many Scripture passages. It comes out very clearly in Christ’s letters to the seven churches that we find in the Revelation. We also see Paul encouraging the Christians at Philippi to stand firm in their faith and practice as he emphasized in the last several verses of chapter three. There Paul had encouraged them to follow his example because he was looking to Jesus Who showed us the way to walk (conduct our lives) based on heavenly (eternal, spiritual) values rather than what the world believes to be important.

There are plenty of things that can happen in a local church (or in any area of living our lives) that might discourage us from standing firm, but we should see these as opportunities to show what difference being in Christ makes in our getting along with each other, in practicing virtue in our daily activities, in being content with our circumstances, and in trusting God for all our needs. By realizing what is truly important we can stand firm and not let up even in the face of disagreements.

Unite – 4:2-3

² I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. Philippians 4:2-3 (ESV)

If disagreements are not properly handled, then these can lead to disharmony in the church and can harm the mission of the church. We see that Paul tried to head off a disagreement in the church at Philippi by encouraging harmony between two women who were in disagreement. “Encouraging” may be too mild to capture Paul’s plea to these women. One commentary suggests that Paul was saying “I am literally begging you.” The importance of taking care of this situation was strongly emphasized.

Sometimes people need some personal encouragement to facilitate a face-to-face discussion so that differences can be resolved. Toward this end, Paul appealed to someone whom he called “true companion” (or yoke-fellow) to get personally involved in working out a settlement of whatever the issue was between these women. There are a lot of speculations regarding who “true yoke-fellow” was. Some have thought that it was an individual whose name was Syzgos which literally means yoke-fellow. Others have thought that it was a reference to Epaphroditus who would hand-carry the letter to the church at Philippi.

We notice that Paul did not chide these two women for having a disagreement but was complimentary of their work in the church and he also mentioned others who were faithful fellow-workers in support of the work God had started there through Paul’s ministry to them. In a subtle way he reminded them of the great reward they already had in having the security of their salvation as evidenced by their names being written in the book of life. This is a great reason for rejoicing in what God has provided for those who put their trust in Him. This assurance should provide a cure for any bad attitude a Christian might have since the victory we have in Christ has been settled in heaven. When the outcome is already determined, then we can be free of anxiety and any tendency to be anything but kind and gentle with others.

Pray – 4:4-7

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7 (ESV)

When Paul encouraged them (and us) to “rejoice,” he was suggesting an intense state of being glad. It goes beyond being happy and is something that is less dependent on outward circumstances than the condition of our inner being. This rejoicing has a basis, and there is reason for it when we are in Christ. When we realize that outward circumstances cannot change the fact that God loves us and that nothing can separate us from the love of God, then we can live life with a confidence that others do not have. Some people are so dependent on outward happenings for their happiness that they will stubbornly work to make things happen just like they want them to in order to achieve that happiness. They think that they can't be happy, otherwise. Paul advised that we can be pliable or flexible in such matters because our happiness is in the Lord and not in the specifics of how we do things. This is what he meant when he told them to let their reasonableness (moderation, graciousness, or gentle spirit) be known to everyone.

Peace or absence of anxiety in a person's life comes from confidence. There is only one thing (actually, one person) in whom we can have complete confidence. If our confidence is in anything less than God, then we are headed for disappointment. If we know that God is in control and that we are in His will, then we can be reasonable in the midst of chaos, we can be

bold when others are uncertain, and we can be hopeful when it appears that all is lost. We have no excuse for being anxious about the outcome since we know that God will cause everything to work together for good to those who love Him. This is an example of an exchange that we make with God. In prayer we give Him our worries and (in exchange) He gives us His peace. What we need to do is to be cooperative with God and let Him know our needs. We are to have such confidence that God will provide and answer our prayers that we give Him thanks for what we ask even before we receive it. There is a serenity that accompanies those who know God is in control and know that God loves them and wants only what is best for them. There is nothing else that can provide such peace – not wealth, not health, not friends, not anything!

Dwell – 4:8-9

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:8–9 (ESV)

In our world situation we see many nations spending billions of dollars on defense. Great sums of money are spent on keeping ready to go to war in case we are attacked. When we do have a war, then the spending really gets into high gear. Just imagine a world that is at peace and there is no need to defend ourselves from aggressors. Think what all the money that is spent on preparing for and waging war could do if it were spent on making conditions better, in eliminating hunger, in finding a cure for cancer, heart disease, homes for the homeless, care for the elderly. What a better world we would have.

In the same way, Paul has encouraged us to take our mental resources and stop spending our thought time and effort to concentrate on negative things but instead to build up our minds with positive thoughts. Just think how much better persons we would be. We often complain about the media reporting only the bad news and ignoring the good things that happen. We do the very same thing in our thought life. If we refuse to concentrate on the negative and look for the positive, then we will be better for having done so. Is it possible to do this? The bottom line is that we are to look for the good in every situation. If we see no good, then we should look for opportunities to bring something “good” to bear in the situation.

The starting point for training our minds is with “truth.” The Greek word used here literally means “nothing hidden.” This is closer to the idea of the English word “honesty.” We know that if we begin with a false premise or a hidden agenda, then the conclusions we come to will likely be flawed. Closely associated with embracing truth is having honesty as a way of life which should prevent us from approaching whatever we do with an aura of deception. People should not have to try to figure out what we really mean when we make a statement to them.

The second item for training our minds is to embrace those things that are honorable. (The KJV translated this as “honest” but the meaning in the Greek is closer to the idea of reverence.) This might be described today as have respect for others or simply of not thinking about things in a base or crude context but with thoughts that might be described as noble. If we think that “take care of our own interest because no one else will do that” is a good principle by which to live, then we will have behavior that is quite different compared to behavior that results from adopting the principle of “love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

The third area for training our minds or our thinking process is to test all our thoughts with the standard of the word of God. If “what” or the “way” we are thinking about things is in conflict with the clear message of the word of God, then we need to adjust so that our thoughts are “just.”

Purity of thought is meant to lead us to think in terms of what is appropriate for a saint or those who have been set apart for God's service. This comes from the same Greek word from which we get the word holy. The word translated "lovely" implies that our thoughts should be suitable and worthy of the idea of brotherly love. The "good report or good repute" would instruct us to focus on the positive and not the negative qualities of a person or an idea. When you think of a person, what comes to mind about them. Is it their faults or their positive attributes that we think about? The idea of virtue is related to moral goodness. Praise would point us in the direction of not being critical of others. We are conditioned to look for the flaw or the error and, in doing so, we are likely to miss the opportunity to commend people for what they are doing that is good. We could easily tie this admonition regarding the way we think and what we think about with Paul's writing in Roman 12 about renewing our minds so that we can be transformed rather than remaining conformed to the standards of the world.

We just covered a very straightforward enumeration of how to live a full and abundant life that glorifies God and benefits others. Is this easy to do or impossible to do? One thing that makes living this way so difficult is that we have been conditioned (imprinted) to do exactly the opposite in so many of these areas of life. Alexander MacLaren observed that many have been so accustomed to living with thoughts that are small, trivial and frivolous and perhaps also with thoughts that are impure and abominable, that to entertain their opposites seems almost an impossibility.

In order to accomplish the "good" ways of thinking, we have to abandon the "bad" ways of thinking which requires awareness and discipline. I believe that it is never too late; however, we have to begin by consciously practicing turning our thoughts from things that are trivial and negative to things that are important and positive. When Christ is enthroned in the sanctuary of our minds, then help is available and the outcome will be a peace that is beyond our understanding.