

Joy and Peace

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Date: 10 July 2017

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[0 : 00] I recently saw a video of two boats on the water. They were in the ocean, right next to each other. Same make, same model, exactly the same design.

And it was choppy. The water was choppy, and so waves were sort of coming in regular intervals and smacking against these boats. And the video was amazing because of the difference between these two boats.

They looked exactly the same. And the boat on the right was rocking sort of violently, I mean, to the point that it would be difficult to stand on the deck without holding on to something, lest you lose your balance.

The boat on the left was remaining perfectly calm, perfectly even keeled. The waves were hitting it, but the boat remained unmoved, and the waves passed by.

And the reason is because the boat on the left had an internal stabilizer. It's this technology used for mid-sized boats. It's based on the movement of a gyroscope.

[1 : 06] You may be familiar with this in segways. It's the thing that keeps them upright. And so this has been developed for boats as a way to keep them steady in the water. But it was fascinating to see the difference between two boats that on the outside look exactly the same, and yet one is being rocked by the waves, and the other is remaining perfectly even keeled.

And the reason I bring that up here is because in our study of Philippians, which has been going on for a couple of months, we've come to chapter 4, and we've come to this interesting kind of series of exhortations that Paul gives.

Philippians chapter 4, verses 2 through 9. And this is a place where Paul actually shows us that the same kind of thing is possible for human beings, that it's possible for a person to develop internal stabilization that keeps us steady, keeps us even keel, regardless of what is happening in our outer world.

And as we planned this series months ago, we could have had, you know, no knowledge that anything like the past week would have happened. And as I was praying about this Sunday, I was wondering what we should do, and I was looking again at these verses and thinking that, in fact, this is a strangely appropriate topic for us to focus on.

And as we look at the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, as we look at the deaths of these five police officers in Dallas in retaliation, these are just the most recent examples that highlight that our society feels as though it's being torn apart.

[2 : 50] It feels as though the very fabric of our society is being ripped to shreds. I mean, if you look at the news and you hear and you talk to people, it almost feels as though we are at war within ourselves.

And I've heard that said more and more and more. And interestingly, this passage, the context of these verses, we don't often remember that the context of, you know, for those of us who have been Christians, this is a very familiar passage, and some of us have even memorized it over the years.

But we forget that the whole context of this is actually the context where reconciliation is needed. Paul is speaking about this internal stability in the context of two women in the church in Philippi, Euodia and Syneche.

And they are fighting. They are at odds with one another. And there's good reason to think that their conflict is actually tearing the church apart. And so what Paul does in a very interesting way is to entreat them each to be of one mind in the Lord.

And then he turns his attention to the rest of the community. And he essentially says, their conflict is actually your responsibility. In other words, all of you, he actually uses the word fellow, my yoke

fellow, my true companion, my true yoke fellow.

[4 : 11] And that's actually, I think, a reference to all of the Christians in the church, because this letter would have been read aloud. So Paul is addressing everyone, and he's saying, they're fighting, and you have a role to play in their reconciliation.

Do all that you can. But, what he next does is he doesn't get into the specifics of their disagreement, but rather he focuses on the hearts and minds of the whole community.

And it's as though in this passage Paul is saying, if you're going to be the kind of person who is able to contribute to peace and reconciliation, before you're able to do that, you need something to be true within yourself.

So it's almost as though he's saying, and the principle really is this, that we cannot hope to promote peace, to promote reconciliation, to be a part of the solution, until we have experienced peace within ourselves.

In other words, peace out here flows from peace in here. To put a finer point on it, if you want to make peace in the world, begin by finding peace with God, because that's the only peace that will actually make a difference in the world.

[5 : 31] And so the question tonight is, how do we get that peace? And that's what Paul concerns himself with here. How do we develop this kind of internal stabilization that allows us to remain even-keeled, to have the kind of perspective and compassion and self-awareness and empathy needed, to actually bring about peace in the world?

And he calls us to three practices. This is what we're going to look at tonight. Three practices. First, he calls us to practice the presence of God. And if you're not familiar with what that means, or if that's an odd phrase to you, it is an odd phrase.

We'll talk a little more about it. To practice the presence of God. Then he calls us to practice grateful prayer. Not just prayer, but prayer that is laced with gratitude. And then thirdly, he calls us to practice another odd phrase, good spiritual hygiene.

So these are the three things that we'll look at. Let's pray for the Lord to lead us. Heavenly Father, we have heard a lot of words this week, a lot of wisdom offered.

But we know that ultimately our hope and the hope for this world is not going to be found in human wisdom or in human power, but in your wisdom, in your word, and in your power.

[6 : 48] And we are here because we desperately need your word and your power. And we believe that you are here and that you will speak to us. And so it's your voice that we crave and need.

So please give it to us, Lord, and open our hearts to receive it. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, amen. So the first thing that Paul calls us to is God's presence.

And by the way, if you're wondering why we know that these are practices rather than simply kind of thoughts to bear in mind, all of the verbs, and this gets a little geeky, so bear with me, but all of the verbs here, all of the verbs that Paul calls us to, they're all present imperatives.

And in the Greek, you translate a present imperative as an ongoing habit. So these are really three lifestyle commitments that Paul calls us to, calls all Christians to.

Practice God's presence. In verse 4, he says this, Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice. Let your reasonableness, meaning let the fact that you are for people, that you're on their side, that you want their well-being, let that be known to everyone.

[8 : 02] And then the kind of bomb, the Lord is at hand. And I love this because he begins by reminding Christians, reminding us of the great truth at the heart of the gospel.

You know, I think we can sometimes forget that the reason that Jesus came was in part to fulfill a promise that God made. He said, I will be the God who dwells with you. I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will be with you.

And so Jesus comes and does everything necessary to fulfill that promise so that God is actually with us here in this very moment. For Christians who know God by faith through Jesus, God is never out there, which is something that we forget.

Because often, and I say it, we all say it, you know, we go through, if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you can go through a phase of feeling like God is distant. You know, I just feel like, and that's just a part of being a Christian, but God is actually never distant.

God is always right here. Here's the reason we're talking about this. There are countless strategies, books, conferences that promise contentment, how to deal with your stress, how to deal with your anxiety.

[9 : 21] But the problem with these things, and you know, when you look at the practices as breathing techniques, meditation, you know, mindfulness practices, yoga, these are all helpful things. They all help with stress and anxiety, but they all share one limitation.

And that is that they only focus on technique. And they don't ever start with the ultimate questions. They don't ever begin with the existential source of anxiety.

So, I mean, if I'm stranded on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, in the pitch black dark, in the middle of the night, and I'm waiting on a tow truck, my car's dead, you know, I can do some deep breathing to kind of get me through.

I can do some meditative practices, practice some mindfulness, but what I really need is a tow truck, right? I mean, if I'm sick and the ambulance is on its way and I'm on the floor of my house and I can't move, and I need, you know, I can do some deep breathing and that maybe will bring my heart rate down and that's good, but I really need a doctor, right?

In the same way, our anxiety is sourced in this existential angst that we feel. In other words, we know that we live in a world that's bigger than we are. And we know that we have very little control over that world, over our own lives, over our own bodies.

[10 : 42] And we know that we can't even control what's going to happen in the next moment. And the source of most of our anxiety is that lack of control.

It's trying to have control over things that we can't ultimately control. And so much of life feels like we are stranded in the dark or sick and lying on the floor and we're sort of crying out, wondering, is there someone out there?

You know, is there someone who can make sense of all of this? I mean, this past week, when you look at these horrible, tragic deaths, you're filled with anger and despair, but under that, again, you wonder, is there anyone out there watching this?

Is there anyone who is going to make it right? In other words, is there anyone who's going to come and save us from this? Or are we doomed to see these things play out again and again and again and again?

Is someone coming? Paul says true peace begins when we recognize that there is someone and that he has come.

[11 : 54] That he has come. So the first thing we need to do in order to develop this kind of internal stability is to recognize this and to practice the presence of the one who has come.

Practice the presence of God in our daily lives. And I know that's an odd phrase. You know, you say, well, those of you who are Christians, and some of you are and some of you aren't, but those of us who are Christians, typically being a Christian involves at least assenting to the fact that there is a God and that he's present.

But I think functionally, most of us don't actually live that way. We live functionally as though there is no one, that no one came. In other words, we live with a kind of functional atheism.

So Paul's calling us to cultivate an awareness of God's presence in our daily lives. And that's why he says in verse 4 that we should rejoice always. You say, what do you mean always?

Like at the hospital, at a funeral, we should always rejoice? And Paul says, yes, you should rejoice always. Why? Because there's always a reason to rejoice. Because no matter what, no matter where you are, no matter how hard it gets, God is with you.

[13 : 05] God is there in it. You know, it's amazing when the author of Hebrews says that there's no human experience of weakness or suffering that God is unable to sympathize with because he's been there.

He is there. God grieves the loss like the losses that we experienced this past week.

He grieves those with us. And so we need to cultivate an awareness of his presence. There was a young soldier named Nicholas Herman. You've probably not heard of him.

He fought in the 30 Years' War. That was hundreds of years ago. But Nicholas Herman had a kind of a dramatic conversion to Christianity and later joined a monastery. And he didn't have the education needed to become a legitimate cleric.

So he joined as a lay brother and he took on a new name. And the name that he took was Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. And over the decades, because he wasn't an actual cleric, they gave him a job repairing sandals and working in the kitchen.

[14 : 13] And so he does this menial labor. And yet over the decades of doing this seemingly menial work, he actually developed a reputation far and wide for being a man of great peace.

Have you ever known anybody like that? The kind of person that they just put you at ease? You're around them and there's just such a sense of inner calm that you feel at ease in their presence? Well, he was that kind of person.

And so people would come and seek his wisdom and his advice. This guy who worked in the kitchen pulling weeds in the garden. And the reason that he was able to develop this sense of peace is because he devoted himself to the practice of the presence of God, which essentially meant this for him.

Two things. He committed himself to doing everything for the love of God rather than for the praise of human beings. And he committed himself lifelong, whether he was weeding the garden or scrubbing pots or sweeping the floor, to regularly conversing with God.

Literally in the midst of his chores as he's scrubbing pots, talking to God about the work that he was doing, talking to God about his experiences in that moment. And here's what he says about this.

[15:21] He says, there is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.

So this is a weighty call because it's a call to decompartmentalize our lives, to break down the barriers so that we are cultivating a sense of closeness with God at whether we're at work, whether we're scrubbing pots in the kitchen, whether we're in church.

There's a compilation of his letters and correspondence called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Someone randomly put it into my hands years ago, not long after I became a Christian. And a guy just kind of busted in.

I barely knew him. We had met once. He looked at me. He said, you know, I have this book. I was going to give it to somebody else and he had written a note to give it to somebody else as a kind of gift.

And he said, but you know, I have a sense right now that I need to give it to you. And so he tore the cover off because it had the kind of personal note on it and he gave me this book with no cover. But it was this little book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

[16:29] And it has radically, radically impacted my life. So I commend it to you. But he says this, for many of us who are hearing this and we're thinking, how could I ever get started doing that? Banging away at my laptop, answering emails in the middle of my work day and talking to God.

That sounds insane. And yet here's what he says. He says, do not be discouraged by the resistance you will encounter from your human nature. You must go against your human inclinations.

Often in the beginning you will think that you're wasting time, but you must go on. Be determined. Persevere in it until death, despite all the difficulties. So it begins with a bang.

Do you want to cultivate that sense of internal stability? Do you want to actually be the kind of person who is able to be present and compassionate and have the kind of empathy and self-understanding and awareness and humility necessary to be a part of bringing peace in the world?

It begins with cultivating a sense of what it means that God has made peace with you. And that because of that he is present here with you at this very moment. So that's where it begins.

[17:38] Then as Paul goes on, this naturally flows into the next thing. Paul says we need to cultivate grateful prayer, prayer that is laced with gratitude and thanksgiving.

He says this, the Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

Now, I want to look at what he's saying here because there's a negative and a positive. The negative is this, don't be anxious about anything. You know, if you're anything like me, you think, I mean, do you know my life?

That sounds like a religious platitude. That sounds like somebody who hasn't lived. Don't be anxious about anything. The word anxious actually means disproportionate or kind of undue fear. Think about a lot of the anxiety in our life. A lot of it is disproportionate. And then the positive is this, in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

[18:46] And you know, I used to read this and even when I memorized it, I thought, okay, there's two things I've got to do here. I've got to never be anxious and then I've got to always pray. And you know, it's like, well, okay, you know, no.

It's not happening. But what you need to realize is that it's a choice and the one displaces the other. In other words, the one makes the other possible. Right? So how do you begin to displace the anxiety that has taken hold?

You channel that anxiety into prayer. And it's a kind of prayer that is laced with gratitude. Paul says, no matter what our circumstances, whenever we pray, we should express gratitude.

And just to be clear, he's saying, thank God in advance before you know the outcome. I don't know whether I'm going to get into this program or not.

I don't know whether you're going to save this person's life or not. I don't know whether you're going to heal me from this or not. But thank you. Now, that's a tall order. Pray with gratitude.

[19 : 52] Always. See, that's only possible, and this is, if you feel any, you know, just kind of difficulty with that, I'm glad. I feel it too.

And the reason is this, because it's really calling us to decide, do we trust God's character or not? Do you trust his goodness or not? See, you can't pray with gratitude before you know the outcome unless you trust God's character.

Implicitly, completely, unreservedly. See, our anxiety, the anxiety that you feel in your life that I feel is not just because we act like God isn't there. That's part of it. But it's also because even if you believe that God is there, you don't trust him.

I don't trust him. I don't actually trust that God knows better than I do what I need. I don't trust that when God says no, or when he doesn't do what I want him to do, I don't trust that that's actually better for me.

I get angry because I assume that I know better than he does. And again and again and again in scripture, and I think this is because all people struggle with this and so we need to be reminded, you know, the Israelites struggle with this.

[21 : 02] Again and again and again, you read it in the Psalms and yet again and again and again you see example after example of people like Moses and David and Joseph and Paul where you see horrible circumstances and then you see God wielding those horrible circumstances like a paintbrush and using them to paint this beautiful portrait of redemption.

And he does it again and again and again and it doesn't justify the bad, it doesn't excuse the bad, it doesn't cover up the bad, it doesn't minimize the bad, the bad is bad, there's no excuse for it, there's no way to justify it and yet God repurposes it, he redeems it, he commandeers it and uses it for his redemptive purposes.

It's amazing to see God wield suffering and wield tragedy and bring beauty out of it. You know I was just talking last night with a good friend of mine, a guy named Perrin who pastors the Triumphant Church here in D.C.

and he and his wife are good friends of Laura and I's and we were just talking obviously we've had a lot of conversations over the past few days about these deaths and just how to make sense of it and I was just asking his thoughts I said what are you guys going to do at church, how are you going to approach this and just kind of two pastors sort of praying together about about how to respond and he said one of the things that he said that really struck me is he said you know as I as I look at this these these deaths are horrible you know these there's no there's no there's no way to even put words to to this and we're all grieving it and said and yet at the same time I see God bringing beauty out of it in ways that only God could and I said what do you mean and he said well look at the way the churches are banding together you know the rally that we had today there were I don't know how many churches were represented but there were all kinds of churches down in Freedom Plaza right off Penn Ave in the heart of DC right next to the White House and there are pastor after pastor leader after leader police commissioners and chiefs and all kinds of people just one after another one after another reminding us to put our hope in

Jesus saying that there will be a time when God overcomes this and to see that many churches that many pastors from all traditions and denominations and backgrounds all gathered together in the name of Christ it was a picture of the kingdom it was a foretaste of the kingdom parents said it's what an amazing God who could bring something beautiful like that out of such tragedy and of course the ultimate example of this is the cross the worst evil ever committed the worst evil ever committed and yet out of it God brings the greatest redemption ever achieved bringing hope to the whole world so this second practice is the practice that we need in order to develop internal stability it's the habit of regular grateful prayer of taking our anxiety and channeling it into prayer that says God I thank you whatever you do with this I thank you because I trust you the one displaces the

other so very practically when anxiety surges up in your life stop and give thanks channel it and when we do this Paul says in verse 7 the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ

[24 : 27] Jesus the word guard actually means to garrison so imagine the peace of God garrisoning like soldiers marching around your heart and mind guarding it keeping it safe it's an amazing image so these are the first two practices practice the presence of God and practice grateful prayer this leads into the third practice which concerns our own minds and our own hearts in verse 8 Paul calls us to practice what you might call good spiritual hygiene he says in verse 8 finally brothers whatever's true whatever's honorable whatever's just whatever's pure whatever's lovely whatever's commendable if there's any excellence if there's anything worthy of praise think about these things one of the best ways to keep healthy is to practice good physical hygiene right it's my dad was a doctor who for years dealt with very sick people and we would always marvel that we all got sick a lot more than he did we were you know we would say you're around all of these sick contagious people all the time and yet he rarely got sick and we always say well it's because

I probably washed my hands a lot more than you did that his job just required that he washed his hands dozens of times every day he said it's one of the best ways you can keep yourself healthy is just wash your hands and we can expand this to good grooming we can expand it to what we put in our bodies the kind of food that we eat taking good care of your body so here Paul's talking about good spiritual hygiene the thing is most of us take good I mean I think that most of you have good grooming practices I think that most of you wash and bathe and shower fairly regularly I don't I've not heard any complaints about any of you and I think that most of us have good physical hygiene so the question is how can we be so so careful about our grooming and our physical hygiene and be so completely indiscriminate when it comes to spiritual hygiene so completely indiscriminate you know I was just thinking about what are all of the things you know I would never expose my body knowingly to illness but look at all the things I expose my heart and my mind to right the things that I watch the things that

I read I mean you know I mean those of you who know you know Laura and I rarely rarely do we have a night just kind of at home and which is great we we love that part of our lives but rarely do we have an opportunity and when we do what do we love to do we put the kids down we fix good food we make strong drinks and we turn on Netflix that's what we do and we will crush some Netflix we will crush some Netflix we will work I mean like I mean we will get into it it's a late night when when Netflix is on because we love it and then I think about these shows that we admittedly love to watch and I think about and I'm not just talking about you know sex and nudity I'm talking about the kind of wanton violence I'm talking about the kind of hardened cynicism I'm talking about the kind of fatalism the kind of closed worldview that's not even open to the possibility of a God I'm talking about the incredible disregard for human life and and we watch these shows and it's entertainment I mean that kind of stuff makes for good drama it draws us in I think about the stuff that we read I mean after a week like this one my goodness the amount of kind of just vitriol that this kind of oozing through our social media feeds is is astounding it's it's it's a lot of uninformed emotionally charged ranting and attention seeking that's masking itself as commentary and I'm amazed at how many Christians take part and contribute to that and Paul would say we need to curate very carefully what we expose our hearts and minds to we need to be thoughtful about this the word think about means to dwell on what is it that kindles and captures your imagination what do you ruminate on you know it's very easy to ruminate on the latest plot twist in Game of Thrones right I mean it is it's an it's an amazing series and yet by ruminating on that what is the impact over time on my heart and on my mind and if that's the only thing and here's the point if that's the only thing I'm ruminating on what's the impact over time you know so that you know it's so interesting that we expect to be able to watch a couple of shows with people shooting and stabbing each other and then lay in our beds and flip open Facebook or Twitter and read a handful of stories where not only have people shot and stabbed each other but then there's a lot of other people pointing fingers and spewing hate and blame and and and vitriol and read that and then go to bed and expect to wake up a perfectly balanced emotionally healthy stable even killed person it's not going to happen you wonder what kind of impact this is having so the point isn't should Christians watch our rated movies I mean come on the point is we need to be thoughtful consumers of culture we need to be thoughtful consumers of content we need to be as mindful of what we're exposing our minds and hearts to as we are what we expose our bodies to so how do we become people who are what

verse five says how do we become people who are known for our reasonableness right if anything I would hope that Christians in our culture are known for their reasonableness often that's not the case how does that become the case it's by developing a kind of internal stabilization and Paul says that that that comes from three ongoing practices people who practice the presence of God on a daily basis people who practice and channel their anxiety into grateful prayer and people who are thoughtful they're good curators and they practice good spiritual hygiene and he sums all this up in verse nine he says what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me practice these things there it is and the God of peace will be with you so when the waves do come as we are continuing to process and to try to figure out how to respond to this tragedy as future tragedies God forbid happen while everyone else is being rocked being overturned like the boat on the right my prayer and my hope is the more that we as Christians will be able to bring the kind of balanced perspective the kind of empathy the kind of compassion frankly the kind of humility especially those of us in this church the willingness to be the first to confess you know we talk in our church every week we confess sins of omission and sins of commission things we've done and things we've left undone friends we have a lot of confessing to do if we ever hope to heal the racial division in our country we have a lot of confessing to do things that we have done and many many many many things that we have left undone to be those kind of people who are able to go to our knees like that we need this kind of internal stabilization a realization that any outward peace is going to be rooted ultimately in the kind of peace that comes from God so whether it's in the lives of people like you Odea and Synechi or whether it's in this city right here where there's a lot of work to be done this is where it begins if you want to make peace in the world begin by finding peace in God let's pray our heavenly father we recognize we recognize that merely human words and wisdom as we said a moment ago have no power but your word does and your word is that word which has become flesh and given his life to make peace you've promised peace you've made peace through your son Jesus and we hope and pray that one day that peace would be established across the whole earth that as your word says you would gather all peoples together as one in the name of your son Jesus Christ and it's in his name that we pray amen