

Living Well

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[0 : 00] I'm looking at this passage from Philippians on page 186 of your Pew Bibles, Philippians 4, verses 2 through 9. I'm calling this talk, What Matters Most?

I was much influenced by Stephen Covey's book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, though I'm not sure if reading it ever made me more effective. But one of the themes in that book is, What Matters Most?

It's about getting your core principles and values in place. So that you will know what you need to do and how to act in a situation. And that is the nature of the exhortations Paul is giving to the Philippian Christians in these verses from his letter to them.

He is telling them what matters most. How can you be an effective Christian? How can you know total peace in your life, control over your behavior?

How can you be effective in your relationship with God and in your witness to other people?

Because sometimes all of that can be a real struggle.

[1 : 09] The Christian life can be a struggle. Being a Christian witness can be hard. But what Paul is doing is laying out the principle of being powerful and effective as a Christian.

And what he is saying is this. What matters most is that you get your inside centered in, on, with God.

And then the outward expression will follow. That's the principle. Get the inside sorted out. And then the outward will take care of itself.

I want to look at these verses in three sections. The first is verses 2 to 3, which give us a little headline. Then we'll look at verses 4 and 7, which talk about relationship with God.

And finally, we'll move on to 8 and 9, which give us this famous climax of the passage in these famous words of Paul. But first, a headline. Verses 2 and 3.

[2 : 10] So here you get a little headline.

You've got some personal remarks about a situation that has arisen in the local church. But they tell us a great deal about Christian ministry. Because you can see here that Paul has gathered together people that he worked alongside with in ministry.

He's not the professional apostle coming and doing all the ministry while the congregation sits passively. He worked with people setting up ministry. Training, teaching, modeling for them so that he could move on and leave the ministry intact.

So you get this reference to a yoke fellow, a fellow worker, to Clement. And he talks about a group of co-workers and also then these two women who have had a disagreement.

And when Paul refers to this group of people struggling, laboring side by side with me in the gospel, the language of the text really is about teamwork.

[3 : 33] It's like exertion, working together for a prize. It's really the language of an athletic team. It's like the Canadian Olympic team, all laboring together to bring home gold.

They are to be struggling together as if for a prize, contending together, exerting themselves vigorously. Because ministry is hard work.

It's hard to get people to believe in Jesus Christ. But, you see, as Christians and as a congregation, we are meant to be a team. A team in ministry struggling together for the prize.

But if you look closely at the text, you will see what matters first, what matters most in ministry. I entreat you, Daya, and I urge Syntyche, to be of the same mind in the Lord.

Literally, he says, the same thing to think in the Lord. Now, Paul is not calling these women to unity here. Unity is the outward expression of an inner reality.

[4 : 44] No, he is urging them, pleading with them, ordering them. And notice he's talking to both of them, both to Syntyche and Udiah. He is urging them to think the same thing in the Lord.

In the Lord. Now, being in the Lord is not a physical state. We can't physically be in the Lord. It is a spiritual state.

And what Paul is telling these women to do is to get themselves spiritually right back where they need to be. Which is, in the Lord. Now, Paul uses that kind of language a great deal.

Being in the Lord. In Christ Jesus. In Christ. And you see, it's all about our status. As Christians. Because for Paul, either you are in the world. And you are following the world's agenda. And you are doing the world's thing. And under the world's authority. Or you are in Christ.

[5 : 49] And doing Christ's thing. And under Christ's authority. But you see, you cannot be a Christian unless you are inwardly, spiritually in Christ.

It's not about just going to church and putting on a show. It's about the submission of your heart and soul to Jesus Christ. Now, these two women had clearly had a serious disagreement.

But Paul is not calling them back to unity. He orders them to get back to what matters most. Think the same thing in the Lord. Because that inner reality needs to be there.

Or ministry cannot happen. Anyone can go around doing ministry. Doing good works. Getting ministry training. Working full time for the church.

Getting dressed up in funny clothes on Sunday. But if you are not first and foremost in the Lord yourself. Then how can you effectively lead other people to Christ?

[6 : 53] If you have never been to Paris and can't read the map. How are you going to lead people to the Eiffel Tower? And if you are not subject to Jesus Christ.

Then you will not be following his agenda. And you cannot be spiritually fruitful. No, we are called. Every one of us. To labor together in ministry.

It's hard work. And there's a lot of it to be done. But what matters most. Is the inner reality. That your heart and your soul is in Christ.

Is in submission to the Lord. The ministry will follow. But what does that look like? Being in Christ. Well, Paul expands on this in verses 4 and 7.

Which takes me to my second point. Here he starts talking about your relationship with God. Verse 4. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice.

[7 : 51] Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything. But in everything. By prayer and supplication. With thanksgiving.

Let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God. Which passes all understanding. Will keep your hearts and your minds. In Christ Jesus. When I first looked at this.

I thought well there's several rather disparate thoughts there. But actually these three verses hang very closely together. If you look there are four imperatives or instructions. Followed by a result.

And it's all held together by the phrase. The Lord is near. These are what he tells us to do. He says rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

Do not be anxious about anything. But in everything. Present your requests to God. The result. The peace of God that transcends understanding.

[8 : 51] Will guard your hearts and your minds. In Christ Jesus. See it's the same place. Those women were told to have one mind. In Christ Jesus. We're going to be kept. In Christ Jesus.

You guard our hearts. And our minds. You see when Paul says. Rejoice in the Lord always. What he does not mean. Is that we should go around.

With smiles plastered on our faces. And the praises of Jesus. Flowing from our lips at all times.

Though many people seem to think. This is what we ought to do. And they make themselves quite irritating in the process.

He is not calling us. To an empty kind of happiness. Which we present as a Christian front. To the world. Now what he is saying is opposite to that.

He is saying. Get your inner being. Your mind. Your heart. Utterly centered. On the Lord. And then the outer expression will follow. Rejoice in the Lord always.

[9 : 53] Let your gentleness. Be shown to all. Rejoicing in the Lord. It is not a physical thing we do. It is the orientation of our hearts. And our minds.

On Jesus Christ. It is spiritual. And it means that there is nothing greater. For you. Than your faith in Jesus Christ. No more important priority.

Than your relationship with Jesus Christ. No higher joy. Than knowing Jesus Christ. And it is out of that center. That you present yourself to the world.

When you are spiritually. Online. Centered on Jesus Christ. Then you will manifest that. In the way you are with other people. It is not a show.

It is a reality. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The word used can mean fairness. Moderation. Graciousness.

[10:51] Show how kind you are. And what Paul is looking for. Is a graciousness of behavior. That comes not from a sense of duty. Or training.

That is not a front. Or a presentation. But that comes when you are centered. In your heart. And your mind. On Jesus Christ.

When you are submitted to him. In love. With Jesus Christ. I am shocked. When I often. Encounter Christians. Who are cold. Or angry.

And I am disappointed. When I encounter Christians. Who present. A glowing front. And talk the Christian talk. But in fact. You never get beyond that. To the real person underneath.

But what Paul is talking about here. Is the other way around. Focus. On the relationship with Christ. The outer presentation. Will follow. He says the same thing again.

[11:50] Do not be anxious. About anything. Followed by. But in everything. Present your requests. To God. You see. It is the same message. You have got to cultivate.

Your relationship. With God. You have to get your spiritual life. Oriented. Around God. And then your anxieties. Your needs. Your concerns.

All the external things. Will be dealt with. They'll take their right place. And you see. This is about a relationship with God. God is near.

We can rejoice in the Lord. Because he is a person. Not just an idea. Or just an impersonal force. Our God is a personal God. Who takes a great interest in you.

A great interest in all our lives. And what we need to do. Is invest in him. And the result. The peace of God.

[12:49] That passes. All understanding. That's all human understanding. This is not a peace. That comes from casting your eyes. On the world around you. Finding your stability there.

This is not about knowing. How much you have in the bank. Or being confident. In your job. Or your education. That's the peace the world brings. No.

This is the peace of God. That passes all understanding. It is the fruit. That comes. When you invest. Spiritually. In the living God. And.

That peace will guard your hearts. And your minds. In. Christ Jesus. See. That's where we need to stay. In Christ Jesus. That is what matters most.

Not the outward presentation. Of yourself. But that you are spiritually. Inwardly. Kept. In Christ. The rest will take care of itself.

[13:46] Well finally. Paul takes us to the heart. Of what matters most. In his great climax. Of verses. Eight. And nine. Very famous words. And well worth pondering on.

Finally brethren. Whatever is true. Whatever is honorable. Whatever is just. Whatever is pure. Whatever is lovely.

Whatever is gracious. If there is any excellence. If there is anything worthy of praise. Think about these things. What you have learned.

And received. And heard. And seen in me. Do. And the God of peace. Will be with you. Again. It's a similar message. To what we've heard.

In the other two sections. What matters most. Is that you. Establish your inner life. Out of which your ministry. And your outer expression. Will follow. But if you look at this list.

[14:42] It's an interesting list. Because here Paul lists. Eight. Moral. Qualities. If you like. Followed by the direction. To think about them.

To take account of them. Ponder them. Meditate them. And then he tells them. To keep on doing. The things he taught them. With the result. The God of peace.

Will be with you. I just want to think about this list. For a moment. Because it is a very peculiar list. Of absolute. Qualities. Which. They seem to say the same thing.

They're almost synonymous. I mean. If you think of Paul's other lists. For example. The fruit of the spirit. You get quite distinctive qualities. Or if you get his lists of sins. Your lust.

Evil desires. Greed. Anger. Rage. Malice. Again. He's taking us through. A range of different sins. But here he gives us something. That are very similar. Whatever is true.

[15:36] Honorable. Just. Pure. Pleasing. Commendable. And he says. Think about them. What are we to think. Or meditate on. Regarding these qualities.

Well. I did a bit of looking. And what I found is that. In order to grasp. What Paul is getting at here. We need to digress momentarily. And try to understand. To whom Paul is writing these words. Because he is writing to the Christian church. In Philippi. They are Greek. And what Paul is alluding to here. In this list of qualities. Is the ancient Greek.

Philosophical school. Of Plato. Now. What Plato taught. Is that all everyday objects. Ideas. Emotions. In the world around us.

Things we see and experience. They're not real. They do not. They do not possess. Genuine existence. Because they are temporary. Passing.

[16:37] Transient. And so for him. The only true being. Or absolute reality. Can be found in the perfect patterns. Of these things.

Ideas. Or emotions. Which Plato called forms. Forms are eternal. And unchanging. And they are the essence. Of what is right.

Good. Just. True. And beautiful. And remember Paul's words. Whatever is true. Whatever is honorable. Whatever is just.

Whatever is pure. And in Plato's idea. The forms. That he has. All make up his concept. Of the divine. Of God. It's not a personal God. But an impersonal God.

Divinity. All these perfect forms. Make up divinity. And to illustrate this. Plato uses the metaphor. Of a cave. He says. Ordinary people. Sit towards the back of the cave.

[17:34] Forced to look at a wall. And they're in chains. Behind them is a fire. Which projects shadows. On the wall of the cave. Which is what they look at.

So people take these shadows. As the real world. When in fact. They are distorted. Imperfect. Incomplete. Representations. Of reality.

So philosophers. Are the people who escape from this cave. They find the light. Of the real world. Outside. And then they come back. Into the cave. To help.

The people in their sea. To come out of the cave. And see. And so the life. Of the philosopher. Is regarded. As the noblest life. Because he is busy. Contemplating.

The divine. What is good. What is right. What is true. And then. Goes out. And leads others.

[18:28] To do the same. And so when Paul tells us. To think about. Whatever is right. Or true. Or honorable. Or praiseworthy. See he is telling us.

To contemplate. All that is God. He is telling us. To sort of be like. The philosopher. To cast our minds. On God. So that we might. Partake of him.

And then we can go out. And tell others. About him. And of course. It is so much better. Because we worship. The one. True God. Revealed to us. In Jesus Christ. Think.

About these things. Then the action follows. Whatever you have learned. Or received. Or heard from me. Or seen in me. Put into practice. You see.

How can we be. Effective Christians. How can we be. Effective ministers. If we do not know. God. How can we lead others.

[19:21] To faith in Jesus Christ. If we do not know him. And participate him. With every fiber. Of our being. We are the people. Who need to.

Contemplate God. Through the scriptures. Through our Lord. Jesus Christ. And make him. Part of who we are. But then. Action. Follows.

Contemplation. We go out. And tell others. And lead them. To Jesus Christ. When you act. From a heart. And a mind. That has begun.

To grasp. Something of the reality. Of the living God. Through Jesus Christ. Then you will be able. To lead others. To him. Because you will know.

That the only reality. Is God. And having grasped him. With your inner being. You can help others. To do the same.

[20:15] That is what matters most. That we partake. Of the living God. In Christ Jesus. So that we can lead others. To him. The inner reality.

Comes first. Then action. One without the other. Is unthinkable. So there you have. What matters most. For the world around us.

Is fleeting. And the people of the world. Mistake what they see. For something permanent. They are unable. To look beyond. The tangible. But passing world.

Of right now. They cannot see God. And they cannot follow. Jesus Christ. How will they find him?
Where will they look? They need to have.
Their eyes. Of their hearts. Redirected. So that they might look. And see. Jesus Christ. And through
him. God. It is. Our job.
[21 : 10] Every one of us. To make that happen. It is our duty. It is our privilege. To labor together.
For the gospel. But we will not be able.
To liberate others. From the darkness. In which they live. And lead them. To the reality. Of Jesus
Christ. Until we have grasped it. For ourselves.
And that. Is what we are called to do. And that.
The ■ encouragement. The ease of running.