

Rejoice in the Lord Always

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you and we praise you for the gift of your Holy Spirit. We thank you for the surpassing worth of Jesus Christ, who supremely is worthy of our praise.

And we ask, Father, that we will see Jesus as we hear your word today, that you will turn our hearts and our minds to him, that we can live for him and know the joy that only you can give.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, as you're turning to Philippians 4 on page 982, I just want to remind you where we are in a very short sermon series during the season of Advent.

We have been thinking about what Advent calls us to, calls us to know of the coming of Jesus, about his grace that comes into our life.

In the past, in Jesus dying for us and rising in power, and now by the Holy Spirit coming to be with us and to live in us and to lead us, and that Jesus will come again in glory.

[1 : 04] And that we have this immense privilege as Christians to respond to the grace of God in our lives, that we can actually keep in step with the Spirit.

There are practical things we do in our lives to be able to receive the grace that God has given to us. So Advent's a real opportunity for us to do this, and we've been talking about redeeming the season and thinking about spiritual practices that draw us closer to Christ.

So in the last three Sundays, we heard sermons from the readings for Advent that have been in place for hundreds of years, and we talked about putting on Christ and his armor in light, especially because he has covered us with his righteousness.

We've talked about embracing the certain hope of Jesus Christ, the gift of what that means for us in our lives. And then last week, we talked about really shaping our lives around the judgment of Jesus, that we live for the day that God would say to us, well done, good and faithful servant, that we would receive the praise of God as we have shaped our lives around him coming for us one day. Today is our last in this series, and we are, as you can see in Philippians 4, 4-7, talking about joy. It is the discipline, the practice of rejoicing.

[2 : 32] And so you can see that Paul says in verse 4, rejoice in the Lord always. And if he didn't get that, he says, again, I say rejoice. And it's kind of a strange thing when you think about it.

How can you be commanded to rejoice? You know, isn't that something that is an emotional response to something good that has happened? You know, my child did wonderfully well in the solo, in the Christmas concert last week.

Or because of the fact that somebody asked me to marry them. Or because I love snow and I woke up this morning and saw what happened. Or because my team has won the Stanley Cup.

Or the sun came out after weeks of rain. There's lots of things that can come to us that we take joy in. And it's a response to these special moments. So how can we be commanded to always rejoice in the Lord?

How can he make that commandment? Well, what Paul is telling us in his command is to actually remember the surpassing goodness of Jesus.

[3 : 42] To remember the surpassing goodness of Jesus. To bring that into our minds and our hearts. Now, in your everyday life, this congregation has a real range in how good you are at remembering things.

Some of you keep appointments really, really well. You have a very organized life. And you never drop the ball. You always know where your wallet and keys are because they're in the same place every time you walk in the door.

And your mind can focus on more than one thing at once. That's very impressive. But others of us are memory challenged. So we forget our own birthday.

We spend lots of time looking for our wallet and keys at home. We love that invention of the tile that beeps where your wallet is. And any new thought that we have necessarily pushes out any other thought that was there because our brain doesn't like to have too many thoughts going on at the same time.

And I must say that I relate better with the latter issue. I'm memory challenged. But before you get smug, you people who are good at memorizing and remembering, I want you to know that Paul says that we all suffer, each one of us, from spiritual forgetfulness.

[5 : 06] We have bad spiritual memories. We are very prone to forget the majesty and the goodness, the power, the mercy, and the holiness of Jesus Christ.

And that is one of the big reasons why we as a church have as our gift the Bible and the sacraments. They are God's gift to our spiritual forgetfulness.

So over and over again, the Bible calls us to remember. And that remembrance is always intertwined with joy.

You especially see that in the Psalms. They're a wonderful gift for us. All through the Psalms, you'll hear things like Psalm 5. Let all who take refuge in the Lord rejoice.

Let them ever sing for joy all the time. And then Psalms 97, after recounting what God has done for us, it says, Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.

[6 : 09] Give thanks to his holy name. And that's repeated over again throughout the Psalms. And that's why this morning, we are actually rejoicing in the Lord.

Because we are remembering Jesus. As we hear God's word preached and sung and prayed, we are remembering the glory of God in our lives.

And then when we are going to have communion today, communion is called sometimes the great thanksgiving, the Eucharist. There is joy in thanksgiving. And what happens in the Lord's Supper, drink this regularly, as often as you shall drink it.

When or how? It's in remembrance of me. So you see that we are remembering who Jesus is.

His resurrection, his glorious death for us on a cross is brought clearly to our minds and our hearts as though it is today. And it shapes us. It's the gift of remembering.

[7 : 15] And that rejoicing can happen even when you are very, very unhappy. Even when circumstances are very unjoyful in your life. It has to, otherwise Paul wouldn't say do it all the time.

And the first people I think of when I think of rejoicing in unhappy circumstances is Paul and Silas. They were sitting in a Philippian jail, the same city where the church is that he's writing to a few years before.

Cruelly beaten, he and Silas were. And very unfairly treated. And in the middle of the night, they are, as we hear, singing hymns and praying and the other prisoners are listening to them in Acts 16. Now you see what they're doing there? They are remembering Jesus in their prayers, in the hymns that they're singing. They are remembering his glory, his rule, his presence, and his goodness.

That is the perfect example to us about what it means to rejoice in the Lord. And the question for us this morning is how can we rejoice in the Lord in our own lives, in our everyday lives, with all the different circumstances?

[8 : 28] Well, Paul, as the veteran of practicing joy, tells us very practically in this letter. And I want you to notice something that I didn't realize until I came to this chapter is that in chapter 3, verse 1, if you turn there, he repeats himself.

He says, Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. So he said it way up there, and then he says it down here in chapter 4, verse 4.

What's going on here? Well, all throughout that section, he is telling us, practically, how to rejoice in the Lord Jesus. And there's an urgency because he understands the Lord is at hand.

And so I want to look at that chapter 3 and our passage together. Because he talks about Jesus being near us and the certainty that he will come again, therefore, practice joy.

And I want to say that there are five ways, maybe there's more, but there's five ways in chapter 3 and our passage that speak to us about the things that rob you of joy, that steal your joy.

[9 : 37] And then in each case, he shows how we turn back to Jesus, how we can actively remember him and rejoice in him. So I want to look at those five things very briefly, each one, as we go through chapter 3.

The first part of chapter 3 tells us that we are tempted to accomplish our own salvation. You know, to do the things that will make God accept me.

So in Philippi, there were teachers that came into the church and said, you cannot be accepted by God fully until you perform the sign of belonging, which is circumcision, and keep all the ceremonies of the Old Testament.

But Paul says, no, no, no. Remember, you are forgetting Jesus. So in verse 3, he says, we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

So he's reminding them, you belong to God not because what you have done or are doing, but only because of what Jesus does for you and has done for you.

[10:51] And that's true whether you began trusting Jesus today or whether you have been trusting him for 90 years. So Paul says, you know, in my own life, I did everything I possibly could to make God accept me, to create my own salvation.

And he says in verse 8, it is all loss. Why? In verse 8? Because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

He's saying, in Jesus alone, can I know with great joy that God loves me, that Jesus has forgiven my sin, and that he has reconciled me to God.

Only in Jesus can I be God's child. Can I be forever accepted and brought into the life, the new life, of living for him. And I think this is so critical for us because if you have been a Christian for a while, I think there's a greater temptation to have confidence in the flesh.

Over time, I begin to think, I'm entitled to God's salvation because of what I have done, because of my Christian life. We can easily think, we have arrived.

[12:04] We've earned God's favor. I know the Bible. I feel deserving of God's goodness because I am a pretty good Christian. I serve regularly. And you know, if you are not a Christian today, you also have confidence in the flesh.

You will say, I have lived a good life. Therefore, I deserve any spiritual good that might be out there. But Paul says that this confidence in the flesh robs us of joy because there's no hunger or thirst for Jesus who alone gives us this grace in our lives.

There's no need for him. And that brings a stagnation into your relationship with God. You don't grow in him. You don't hunger after him. And that's why Paul says to you and to me, remember the surpassing worth of Christ Jesus as your Lord.

Knowing Jesus as your Lord. seek to know Jesus more and more. Read the Bible with that in mind. To know him and his surpassing worth.

Paul's urgent in this call to thirst for him and to depend on his resurrection power to continually transform you. We are meant to be continually growing in Jesus Christ.

[13:22] And there's deep joy in doing that. In growing in that relationship with Jesus. Now the second thing Paul says is equally critical.

He says it in verses 12 through 16. He says that dwelling in what lies in your past robs you of joy. It steals your joy.

So if you dwell on past sins, if you dwell on past failings, on past hurts, it steals your joy. And Paul speaks from experience.

Because as he says a little earlier in this chapter, he says, I was a persecutor of the church. I made Christians miserable. I ruined the lives of many Christian people.

I have much to be ashamed of. And many of us have done things in the past that we are ashamed of. We also have been really hurt at times.

[14:20] And we hang on to and cultivate a real sense of bitterness in our lives, in our heart, in our mind. Or you may be simply discouraged and disappointed that you were not able to do some of the things that you had hoped to do for God in your life.

But to dwell on these things brings a forgetfulness of God that steals your joy. It actually presses you down. It keeps you from the life that God has for you.

And Paul says there is some good forgetting that we need to be doing in order to remember, to have godly remembering. So he says in verse 13b, one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

So if you are going to practice rejoicing in the Lord, there is a critical, daily, leaving of sin and hurt from our past with Jesus.

We have to leave that sin and that hurt with Jesus Christ. There is a promise from a great chapter in the Old Testament, Lamentations 3, that says the Lord's mercies never end.

[15 : 42] They are new every morning. the practice of rejoicing in Jesus picks up on this. It means daily turning your past over to the new mercies of Jesus every morning.

And that is godly forgetting. Every day God is calling you to this upward call to Jesus. He is your goal. He is your prize.

And to dwell on the past is to hinder you from straining forward. every day is a new beginning. He has goodness in store for you today. He has goodness in store for other people as you serve him. And he frees you by the forgiveness of your sins to walk in his grace and joyfully strain forward to what Jesus has for you. It's a daily thing.

That means practicing joy. And then thirdly, in verse 19, Paul says that setting our hopes on earthly things robs us of joy as well.

[16 : 46] Now this is a real temptation for us living in Vancouver. There are so many earthly things that we can put in the place of Jesus that can become our idols.

And many of those are good things. We've talked about this before. Relationships in our lives, families, our careers, the things that we strive for in life to accomplish. they're good things. But they are idols if they live in the place of God. They have the rightful place that Jesus has. If they take that place, they will rob us of joy.

It will drain joy from our lives. We can even have idols within the church so that the style of gatherings or the numbers of people attending or the building itself that we meet in can become all important.

all of them good things. But when they become all important, we are dwelling on earthly things. If we do this, we inevitably will forget the glory of Jesus.

[17 : 49] So what does Paul do? He shifts our mind from being set on earthly things and shifts our mind to the glory of Jesus Christ.

He gives us a glorious glimpse of Jesus so that the idols will lose their grip. Look in verses 20 and 21. Here is this amazing reminder. He says, But our citizenship is in heaven and from heaven we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things, all of the things we might worship. They are subjected to himself. So that's just a taste of the glory of Jesus. And Paul says, we rejoice as we fill our mind with that vision and as we live for the values of heaven of the one who has subjected all things to himself and who's coming for us and will transform our bodies.

So C.S. Lewis wrote this in Mere Christianity and you know this quote but it's so helpful for us. He says, you know, if you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next world.

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this world. And I believe that's true.

[19 : 18] Jesus is infinitely worth building our lives on. He's infinitely worth working for and serving for in this life. To stand on this truth fundamentally shapes the way that you live, what you do with your money, the decisions that you make, what you do with your talents and your time and when you're shaped that way by heaven you will do much for this present world.

You will bless the world as God has called us to. And then the fourth joy stealer that he brings up it kind of comes out in a surprise because he actually calls out two members of the church.

It's like standing here and naming two people and he says to two women who are leaders in the church in chapter 4 verse 2 stop your disagreement. Get along.

And in verse 3 he calls on his true companion which is probably a name for the whole church of Philippi. He calls on his true companion to help them to agree in the Lord.

Now Paul takes this very seriously. That's why he's naming people and he's calling the whole church together. He takes it seriously because disunity leads the church to forgetfulness about Jesus.

[20 : 38] It pulls the church away from him because the natural inclination is for the church to take sides and to gossip to tear down Christ's body. But instead Paul calls the church in the next verse verse 4 to rejoice in the Lord.

Rejoice. Again you've got to remember rejoice. Remember that it is his church. Remember that he is the author of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is his body.

In our own church at St. John's over the last couple of decades we have faced really difficult and important decisions that had to be made. And many times there was significant disagreement and differences of opinion over the direction we should take.

how did we remain united? How did God give us this grace of unity? Well it was because of the fact that we remembered who Jesus is.

We listened to God's call to rejoice in the Lord first of all. To remember him and his glory as most important as we relate to one another and disagree with one another.

[21 : 50] God worked through that to bring unity. unity. And that is important in our personal lives as well because when you experience disunity and unforgiveness in your relationships you are robbed of joy.

There is a forgetfulness of Jesus in that. And Paul says the way to prevent this is to rejoice in the Lord and do that in verse 5 by letting your reasonableness be known to everyone.

Now I think that word reasonableness is probably not the most helpful translation. What does that mean? You're reasonable and that brings such grace. Well the word means is a very full word. It means not seeking or demanding your own rights. It means a strong gentleness in your relationships with other people. It actually means choosing not to be offended by people in your life. and it means seeking the best in the people you're relating to. You see this is a practice that is very outward looking. It seeks to serve. It reflects something of the character of Jesus Christ himself.

[23 : 02] So it actually draws us to him. And you notice that Paul says right after that the Lord is at hand. You know here is Jesus' character. You're living it out. And that spreads the joy of Jesus to the church of the knowledge of Jesus to the church.

So it's very important that Paul says it should be seen by everyone. Well I want to close with the last teaching about rejoicing in the Lord.

And I want to remind you because this is the fifth point where we've come from. Paul has said this is how you practice joy. Remember the surpassing worth of Jesus.

And secondly forget what lies behind. Press on to what Jesus has for you. And thirdly set your mind on heavenly things. And then seek unity by reflecting Jesus' character.

And he sums it all up in the fifth teaching by saying in verse six don't be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.

[24 : 09] Now Paul's saying that anxiety is a major joy robber for all of us. And there was much to be anxious about in the Philippian church.

Paul was writing to there were false teachers there was potential division people who had believed in Jesus were walking away from their faith. Paul had good and godly concern here and the Philippians had concern for him.

He's in jail. He's facing a possible execution. Now the trouble is that good concern can turn very easily into anxiety. And it's interesting that the same word that's used for anxiety is used in chapter 2 verse 20 to mean a genuine concern for one's welfare.

But the word that Paul used in the context that Paul uses it in verse 6 means an anxious harassing care. It has a sense of trying to carry the burden of the future.

You know to carry what only God should carry. And it shows us how easily our good concerns can turn into something that weighs us down. That saps our joy. That makes us forget Jesus.

[25 : 18] And all of us experience this. All of us do. Paul's not saying here don't experience anxiety. That would be ridiculous. But he is saying don't let it take root.

Meet it every time with what? With prayer and thanksgiving. Make known your request to God. God. And there is a real call. A real call to pray about everything.

Both big and small. You know I think in a way we should take our cues from little children who pray. I don't know if you've seen little children pray but they will pray for a huge variety in one prayer.

They will pray for the peace of the world and in the same breath pray for their stuffed animal that they have lost. And we learn from that. Jesus says bring everything to God your heavenly father.

He says the great antidote to anxiety in Matthew 6 is to know that you have a heavenly father. That's the gift Jesus gives to us. You have a heavenly father who knows you intimately who provides for you and wants you to pray to him.

[26 : 25] He has your best right goodness at heart. No matter how difficult it is he will bring his goodness and righteousness through it. And we really do practice the rejoicing in the Lord every time we pray to him.

And it especially happens if we do it with thanksgiving which Paul is calling us to. Why is that? It's because gratitude in our prayers will always remind us of Jesus.

When you think of what you're thankful for in your prayers what's the first thing you think of? Well you think of Jesus. You think of his grace to us that he came to Bethlehem to save us from our sins. You thank him for coming into your life and giving you life now.

And you thank him for the certain hope that he will come back for us as our risen Lord. That kind of prayer will draw us, will remind us of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So today as we leave this passage may God help us to actively rejoice in Jesus every day. and may God the Holy Spirit work in your heart and in your mind so that you remember with joy his great glory and his goodness towards us all the time.

[27 : 43] And then God's promise to you at the end of our passage is that the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen. Amen.