

In the beginning of the book of Philippians we are introduced to the situation of the Philippian church. Their predicament is this: Paul has been imprisoned, the location of his house arrest is debated, but more importantly the church is suffering in angst and anxiety because of it. Additionally to this, the church is facing pagan opposition and pressures to adopt Jewish custom and identity.

But honestly, if we read these verses just at the surface the picture of an imprisoned Paul does not come across quite clearly. By the time we arrive to chapter four, it is easy to forget that Paul was in shackles while he was writing this letter. It's not hard to pin a cape on Paul, to idealize him and his ministry, and forget the hardships. To just throw him on a movie poster and say, "Well this guy is different! He's written a major part of the New Testament! He saw Jesus on the road to Damascus! This guy is special!" It comes to the point that Paul becomes our New Testament super hero!

And so we ignore the suffering and focus on the joy that some would describe as "happiness". After all, doesn't he just go on and on about the joy we find in Christ? About the hope in his promises and the pleasure of his mercies? Well, a joy like that could not possibly be found in hardships, right? It couldn't possibly be found in broken relationships? Or deathly illnesses? Or even in facing certain execution? And is that what it's really all about? Is Paul ignoring the bad to focus on the good? Are we, as Christians simply supposed to forget the hard times 'cause good times are coming and soon we'll all be happy? Is joy in Christ just about finding happiness?

Our culture juggles that question frequently. What's life all about? How can I truly be happy? And these questions are hardly ever really answered appropriately; the world responds, "Follow your heart." "Do whatever makes you happy." "As long you're happy, I'm happy." And so in our culture, tolerance is promoted above all things because to be tolerant is to allow others to be happy. But in reality, those who promote tolerance hide behind the facade of seeking happiness for all but in reality, it is an excuse so that no one may oppose their own means of happiness. So let me be happy; I'll let you be happy. And those are the boundaries we set: be happy, just don't get in the way of my happiness. And that's all fun and games until a serious problem arises. What happens when your happiness requires my unhappiness? When your fulfillment requires that I don't achieve my fulfillment? So although what they say is "Let's all be happy (in our own ways)", what they're really saying is that "I'm going to do anything that makes me happy." The mindset there is that happiness is about yourself and no one is allowed to get in the way of your happiness

And we can sum up this heart attitude in one statement, "I'm God!" Now, no one would ever say that out loud but we certainly live like that sometimes. I want my way, I want my happiness, I'm going to formulate my own plan for my life and when things don't go my way, then that's an offense to me. So when that person cuts you off in traffic, oh it's personal. Or when you get pulled over for speeding or you're waiter takes forever to refill your water, then you've been wronged. Or if by some incredibly unusual circumstance you don't get greeted at the door of the church, then someone has got some explaining to do. "Don't they know who I am?" How dare they get in the way of my plan! The desire and search for happiness is rarely ever a wholesome, purifying experience. More often than not it's an idolatrous path to self-actualization.

Herein lies the problem. If life is truly about happiness then there must be someone who can define that happiness or else this life is just a game of free-for-all, every man for himself.

To be frank, I hardly think when Paul is addressing the issue of rejoicing that he is talking about happiness. At least in the sense that we commonly understand it. That is, happiness as an emotion of our hearts. And our hearts, though they may be regenerated (or may not), they are still

bound to a wandering, fractured, nature of anti-Godliness. So happiness can be here in an instant and be gone before you ever knew it.

And honestly, that view of happiness is childish. And I mean childish in the most literal sense of the word. Have you seen how with little children if the most insignificant thing upsets them, they will cry and cry tears over it. For me, that insignificant yet terrible thing was getting a haircut and you would see me at my lowest, my unhappiest. But soon after I would get to go to McDonald's and you would see me at my highest, my happiest. Observe a child for about an hour and you will see them go from the highest high to the lowest low. And somehow, even when we see the brokenness of that system and the selfishness of their heart, we still as adults define happiness by those same standards.

What I would then propose to you is that what Paul is referring to in Philippians, in accordance with the Scriptures, when he speaks of joy and rejoicing, is not a fleeting emotion that brings pleasure or satisfaction but rather joy is part of the change of heart through the Holy Spirit expressed in submission to God and His Word that can only come through the Cross and that rips out the very essence of who you are and replaces it with Christ. So joy begins in Christ and at the same time, is a result of Christ.

Going back to Paul, Philippians is a very personal letter that illustrates the authenticity of Paul's submissive heart and sacrificial service. We get a much more personalized look into the friendships he shared with his longtime companions in Philippi. He knows them by name and his gratitude for them is expressed throughout the entire letter. But we also see that there is much more to Paul than what we would perceive as his "superhero-ness". So once we look at the text for what is really is, it's no secret that Paul faced opposition, he faced hardship, and he held certain responsibilities that overwhelm us. Yet, Paul does not sweep the suffering under the rug but rather brings it into the light so that he may rejoice in it! He rejoices in his suffering. What this means then is that rejoicing is not a mindless act of forgetting our troubles and fabricating happiness out of nothing; no, you don't free your mind or empty your head in zen-like meditation. That isn't called rejoicing, that's called escapism. That's called day-dreaming. It's called fantasy and it's not real.

Is it for nothing that in Philippians 4 after we receive the command in verse 4 to rejoice always that we are also commanded (verse 5), "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone."? Just how does one do that? If there is one thing that it does not mean it's that it does not mean that we should inform everyone of how reasonable we are. Spread the word. No, we must read this in light of what was just said in the verse before. Rejoice and let your reasonableness be known. That is, think about the things that lead you to rejoice. Think about the circumstances in which you find yourself in, think about the relationships and choices that led you there, think about it, but most of all think of the sovereign God who has providentially created you; who has recreated you in redemption, and who has placed you in the time and place you find yourself in now for the fulfillment of His purposes and plan. Think about the circumstances that you are experiencing now that point you back to God and then think about the God who put you there in the first place so you could experience them and ultimately, be pointed back in His direction.

The command is not to cast our anxieties and sufferings to the side and turn to Christ but rather cast your anxieties on Christ himself when you turn to Him. Psalm 55:22, "Cast your burden on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved." 1 Peter 5: 6-7 "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you; casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." So Philippians is telling us to think about the hardships; use your head. Use your God-given logic, reason, and mind to think about your

anxieties but don't end it there; carry those thoughts back to Christ and lay them at His feet. After all, the Lord is at Hand. Paul directly addresses the issue of anxiety in the church. Verse 6: do not be anxious 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 surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God compliments so well the urgent needs of our hearts. In fact, He does not just compliment them; he overwhelms them! He is a Father to the fatherless. He shows mercy to the undeserving. He is a deliverer to the enslaved. He brings hope to the hopeless and he brings peace to the anxious. Peace! Verse 9 tells us He is a God of peace. Meaning, God does not characterize himself as confusing, chaotic, or disorderly; in fact, that's how he characterizes the wicked (Isaiah 48). God characterizes Himself as a God of peace and so to those on whom he loves and looks on with compassion, he brings them peace. It is a condition of well-being or wholeness that God grants his people, resulting in harmony with him and others. And I would be careful when you think about peace because sometimes we immediately associate peace with inactivity. When we say, "These are times of peace." the underlying impression is that not much is going on. But we know that our God is always at work, he is never idle; he does not slumber nor sleep. Peace is a state, separated from chaos and disorder, where we are continually and actively growing in Christlikeness and praise for God. Heaven is the ultimate fulfillment of a place of peace but we are not told that we will be lounging around in the presence of God. No, we are told that it will be a place of continual praise and service to the Lord. And so God grants peace to those who are conflicted and afflicted.

And we are informed in Philippians 4:6 that peace comes through means of prayer.

Now prayer is a hard subject to teach on, not because the Bible doesn't have much to say on it. No one would doubt that prayer is a good thing or that we all have to pray; no one would say that prayer is unnecessary! However, there seems to be this awkward limbo that we find ourselves in: we already know that we have to do it, we're just frustrated because we don't do it enough. And so whenever the subject of prayer is brought up, then we either feel guilty (because we don't do it as much as we should) or helpless (because it feels like we've always been stuck that way). So being redeemed followers of Christ, none of us are surprised at the fact that we have to talk to God but we are frustrated at one level or another by it.

What I would then suggest to you then, or rather what Philippians 4 communicates, is that the key to a prayerful life is not so much discipline in prayer, but rather delight, or as the text calls it: rejoicing. Now don't hear me saying that we are to be an undisciplined church because that is not what I'm saying. We are not going to mature, develop, or grow without discipline. That would be accidental sanctification and I'm not quite sure that exists. You're not going to accidentally grow in godliness. What am I saying though is that if you delight in something, you are far more liable to be disciplined in it, instead of just trying to fabricate discipline in the hopes that you will later delight in it.

So when we are told in verse 6: but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God, what it's saying is that rejoicing rightly is a matter of thinking, it is a matter of knowing the reality of life and the events that occur around us and that we participate in, and the fact is that when we acknowledge these realities then we can't help but feel anxious; we can't help but feel desperate and lose hope. But rejoicing rightly requires more than acknowledgement of reality, it requires a line of communication with God that is accomplished through prayer that is pleading and prayer that is grateful. It's prayer that expresses delight in God.

So when you hear or read a passage like Matthew 11:28, you cannot separate it from the delight or joy of prayer. It says,

"Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden." Some of you may have memorized that as "Come to me all who are weary." The invitation still stands both ways. Come to me all who are exhausted from laboring so much. Now pay attention to the nature of the invitation because it is an uncommon invitation. It is an invitation of great exchange. Because what Christ is not saying is, "Get yourself fixed up or clean yourself up or even drop all those burdens you're carrying and come to me." No; he is saying: Come to me, you who are burdened with sorrow upon sorrow, with anxiety upon anxiety, with labor upon labor, and I am going to give you what you can't give yourself. I'm going to give you rest. So if you walk into any bookstore, the largest section is always Self-Help. Well, that's indicative of our culture. But you won't find a Bible there because God has not given us a self-help book, he has given us Himself. And it is only in Himself that we will find peace.

See, that's the problem with discipline without rejoicing (delight). If your discipline lacks delight, then you are not so much obeying the commands of the Lord, as much as you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Because when you fail, and we will all fail, if your own discipline is all you're relying on, then your understanding of God, man, and this world is going to fall apart.

You see, one of the greatest tests as to whether or not you understand the Gospel is "What do you do when you fail?" Are you overcome with guilt? Are you ridden with so much anxiety that you can't even face God? Do you hide as Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden? Perhaps you try to clean yourself up a little bit? Do you try to right your wrongs and redeem yourself? Because if that's the case, then you are setting yourself up for a life of bitterness and disappointment.

Or do you come to Christ, the One who has redeemed you? Do you come with all your burdens, anxieties, pressures, worries, and sinful self come to Christ and cast all of those anxieties on him? Come to Christ! Come to the Son of God who lived a perfect life and died the perfect death so that you may truly live. Come to Christ, who lived among beings who are broken in what they rejoice in and died for us so that we rejoice fully in someone worthy of being rejoiced in. Come to Him so that your rejoicing may empower your discipline so that when those moments of anxiety creep up on you, you can pray earnestly, you can pray thankfully and you can receive peace.

And so when that person does cut you off in traffic, you realize that that wasn't personal. Or when you get pulled over for speeding or you don't get greeted at the door of the church, then you haven't been wronged. Because the reality is that life is not about us; we are not at the center of the universe; we don't make the plan. And so you see how Christ brings peace in these circumstances? He liberates us from ourselves! He liberates us from the wrong idea that this world is about us. And the last thing I want to do is minimize the pain and hardships you have faced in your life because those are real and valid. But you have to realize that you are your own worst enemy in your pain and suffering. And so when we cast our anxieties on him, we are also casting ourselves on him. We are not the solution. We're not even part of it. The only role that we have in our redemption is the sinful one. So cast your anxiety on Christ and cast yourself on him entirely while you're at it. So instead of asking yourself, "Don't they know who I am?" maybe you could ask them if they know who He is. And you will see how the idolatrous path to self-actualization becomes a righteous path of growing in Christlikeness and receiving grace upon grace for the glory of His name and the fulfillment of His purposes.

There are two implications.

The first implication is that failing to rejoice in the Lord means failing to love the Lord. You cannot properly express your love for God if you have anxiety. You cannot properly express your love for God unless you are rejoicing in Him. Why? Because rejoicing reveals what the heart is after and if you're not rejoicing in God then your heart is not after God. God is not interested in our begrudging submission. He is not interested in anything we can do or say. He doesn't want our obedience, he is not after our behavior; he is after our hearts. So what anxiety does is slowly creep into our lives, maybe not noticeably at first, but it gradually increases until anxiety has overpowered our hearts, burdened our souls, clouded our minds, and weakened our strengths. The familiar combination of these words mean that essentially, anxiety impedes us from fulfilling the greatest commandment: to love the Lord and to love others.

To summarize this implication: Rejoicing reveals what the heart is after; set your hearts after God and rejoice fully in Him.

Perhaps more than just an implication, this second one is more of a disclaimer and then an implication about rejoicing. The disclaimer is that rejoicing is not just a mindset; you cannot just put your mind to it and eventually get rejoicing down right. But what about thinking? You've been telling me to think about rejoicing this whole time! Allow me to make it clear: what I'm not saying is that you should rejoice thoughtlessly or that you should expect rejoicing in the Lord to come naturally but rather that ultimately, rejoicing in the Lord requires more than anything we can do on our own. To put it even simpler, what I mean is that you're a much better Christian when you're saved. You can rejoice in the Lord much better when you have the Holy Spirit working in you to do so.

So all of the points that I've been making thus far are tied to the foundational truths of the Gospel. Verse 7, And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. The peace of God which we find in Christ, on whom we cast all our anxieties, surpasses all our understanding. We don't get it. We can't get it. So put your mind to it as hard as you can, be as disciplined as much as you can, but without the true joy of being regenerated by the working power of the Holy Spirit, made available to us through the words and works of Jesus Christ, rejoicing in the peace of God cannot occur.

The implication then is that you need Christ. I need Christ. We cannot understand this without Christ. So what are you waiting for? Come to Christ.

Steven Morales
F.B.C. St. Peters
January 29, 2012