

Philippians

Week 10 Scripture Guide - Philippians 4:4-7

Biblical Context

Paul continues his whole closing section of the letter (4:1-20) with a series of applications for the Philippians. This week's section is a series of four imperatives: one, rejoice in everything (v. 4), two, show gentleness to everyone (v. 5a), three, never be anxious about anything (v. 6a), and four, pray to God in every situation (v. 6b). These commands are each assembled together and then fueled by two astounding, yet simple, promises: Jesus is near to you (v. 5b), and he will give you peace (v. 7).

v. 4 This section begins with a command to the church to be joyful. The command takes up the thread of joy, which has been woven throughout the whole letter. To give added emphasis, he says it twice. The command is to be happy in the one who is the source of all joy - the Lord God. Charles Spurgeon says of this passage,

It is not a matter that is left to your option; it is not set before you as a desirable thing which you can do without... We ought to obey this precept because joy in the Lord makes us like God. He is the happy God; ineffable bliss is the atmosphere in which he lives, and he would have his people to be happy.

David says, in Psalm 16:11, "in your presence there is fullness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." This is the fountain of all of Paul's joy in the midst of his suffering, imprisonment, and labor for the gospel. So Paul is after the Philippians' joy too. Hence, every command in the following verses (vv. 5-20) draws from the same joyful source. God's joy is the only thing that makes gentleness, peace, and every excellent thing to be worth striving after.

v. 5 Next Paul says that their gentleness should be evident to all people. Paul uses the term, ἐπιεικὲς, to describe the outward expression of the Philippians' character. Because of its broad range of meaning, this is a difficult word to nail down. In trying to translate it, many different English translations land in different places.¹ However, what is clear is that the quality of a gentle, reasonable, gracious heart should be evident to all people. Paul wants this quality of the heart to be what the world immediately notices about them. They should be full of joy and have a settled, gentle demeanor.

A similar parallel is in James 3:17, where he describes what godly wisdom looks like in a Christian, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle (ἐπιεικὲς), reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy." All of these things are consistent with God's own character. Thus, this gentle-reasonableness is meant to be a God-honoring quality because it is found in a heart that is full of God-produced joy.

These commands in vv. 4-5 are both grounded in a single reality: the Lord is near. His nearness is most likely in reference to his spiritual nearness - he is in their midst, he is within them. This idea echoes Psalm 34:18, "the Lord is close to the brokenhearted." However, this nearness could also be implying a temporal nearness,² where Paul ties to the Old Testament prophecies of the "day of the Lord". Like in Zeph 1:7, The day of the Lord is near, he is *almost* here; he is coming to us soon. Hebrews 10:25 has the same idea, "as you see the day drawing near," which is an imperative for continuing fellowship and encouraging each other.

¹ Most translations turn the adjectival, ἐπιεικὲς, to a noun such as "gentleness" (NKJV, NET, NIV), "reasonableness" (ESV), "moderation" (KJV), or "graciousness" (CSB). All of this is to say that there is a wide semantic range. However, the word most literally means "suitableness" or "appropriateness". The paragraph, in its entirety, suggests a peaceful and gentle demeanor that is conditioned by the nearness and sustaining power of God.

² Fee thinks Paul's meaning for "the nearness of the Lord" is a double-entendre for "spacial" and "eschatological". (Fee, Gordon (1995). *Paul's Letter to the Philippians - The New International commentary on the New Testament*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company)

v. 6 Paul's next command goes after the enemy of their joy and reliance on God: anxiety. In a positive sense, the Greek word *μεριμνᾶτε* carries the idea of being concerned or caring for others (Phil 2:20, 1 Cor 12:25). In this case, Paul uses it in the negative sense, which is brought out by the context. He means a mind that is overly worried and failing to trust the Father's gracious providence (Matt 6:25-33). Thus rather than being anxious, they ought to pray. In fact, their anxious thoughts provide the perfect occasion for prayer, as it allows them to take their anxieties and cast them on the Lord (1 Peter 5:7).

The rest of v. 6 is a directive for what to pray for and how they ought to pray. "In everything by prayer and supplication" means that in every circumstance the Philippians have the opportunity to pour out their hearts to God. Prayer (*προσευχή*) is a blanket term for approaching God in humility with honor and praise for who he is. Supplication, (*δεήσει*), means that when they come to him, they should be asking for his provision. Supplication is a direct application of their neediness; it is an understanding of their own creatureliness. They cannot provide for themselves, they must have God act and stoop down to help them. Finally, "with thanksgiving" (*μετὰ εὐχαριστίας*) means that their heart posture should always be one that recognizes everything they have already come from him. Thanksgiving should season every prayer and every request that they make to God. Lastly, we can note a poetic parallel between what Paul commands in vv. 5 and 6. They should let their requests "be made known to God"; similarly their gentleness should be "made known to all men".

v. 7 Paul concludes this last verse with a staggering promise of peace. It is true that God already knows what they need (Matt 6:8); however, there is a promise that attends the simple act of expressing our needs to God. The promise is peace that transcends all comprehension.³ This is a staggering promise. The trade off is incredible. All we are commanded to do is tell God what we need, and in return he gives us peace. Paul's words are echoed by an old English hymn:

O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer! ...Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Savior, still our refuge—Take it to the Lord in prayer.⁴

Jesus promised the disciples this very same kind of peace in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." This isn't any ordinary peace, it is Jesus Christ's own peace, and it surpasses everything we could imagine or hope for. All that is needed of us is to simply ask.

Connection and Application

In this section we see a series of imperatives that are backed up by two great promises. In fact it seems that the promises themselves make the commands possible. "Let us always be full of joy." *Why?* Because Jesus, our Lord is always with us. "Show everyone your attitude of gentleness and graciousness." *Why?* Because the Lord will return again and right every wrong. "Never be anxious, but pray every time your problems feel too overwhelming." *Why?* Because Jesus's peace is great enough to swallow up every doubt, and he cares for you more than you could ever imagine.

These commands Paul gave to the Philippians are possible only because of God's graciousness. He is a God who promises to be with his people (Phil 4:5, Zeph 3:17). He promises to never leave (Heb 13:5). He promises his peace (Phil 4:7, John 14:27). And throughout all the Scriptures, it is God's promises that produce transformed character and transformed communities. We have countless reasons to rejoice with the people of God and to bring every need of ours to him in prayer. 9,

³ *νοῦν* translated comprehension or understanding, yet it most literally means "mind". God promises peace that is beyond our minds.

⁴ "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" by Joseph Scriven, 1855