

Sermon July 12, 2020

### Philippians 4:8-13, New International Version (NIV)

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup>Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

### Thanks for Their Gifts

<sup>10</sup>I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup>I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup>I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup>I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Contentment in Any Situation

By Chris Pickett

Let us pray. “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord.”

Contentment is a good thing, surely! But in “all situations”? Paul says in verse 10, “*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances!*” Now that’s a challenge, a difficult challenge. This is a bit tough to take, **especially with all that this nation and world** is going through right now. When I initially read this text I wanted, ... in fact I think I did say “Really, Lord...” We have a plague (pandemic) overwhelming us over, and as if that is not enough a black man gets his neck crushed by a police officer and the hue and cry in response is incredible, in terms of lifting up the problems of racial injustice that exist today. But it has also brought about more violence on both sides. How can we not be anxious about what will

happen next, how can we not become obsessed with fears about ourselves and our loved ones in a time that is so tumultuous. And yet Paul says,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

In fact, he is so bold as to go on to state

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Have any of you had times of anxiety over the last few months. (you can indicate with nods) I would be surprised if we all have not had times when the news feels overwhelming. I know I have. Anxiety and worry tend to focus us on all that is going wrong and the more we worry about it the worse things seem to be. In fact, we can begin to see only negative possibilities and we begin to project if this happens, then this could happen, and if that happens then this horrible thing will happen and that will be devastating! It seems to be the human thing to do. Toward the end of his life Mark Twain/Samuel Clemens, famously stated, "I have crossed many bridges in my life, most of which I never came to." We all do it, some more than others. But we waste so much energy in the process.

Now like all emotions anxiety and worry have positive values as well they are not always bad. They help us prepare for or avoid problems, they help us avoid dangerous situations or take precautions for a safe trip. It is when these emotions take over, and do not let us see another perspective, that we head for a place of deep desperation. But how do you move from anxiety and worry to be "content in whatever circumstance" as Paul suggests in Philippians 4?

What is amazing about this letter from Paul, is that he is in prison in Rome when it is written. In fact, it is possible that it is a compilation of letters that Paul wrote to the church at Philippi while he was imprisoned. Philippi was one of the first churches Paul established as he began his travels and he knows the people well. Just prior to this passage he calls on two women to work on getting along better as they had both served with him in meaningful ways as they ministered to people. You can tell he cares for the people of the church and later in the passage he expresses appreciation for the support they had sent him on his missionary journeys. He appears to have carefully worded this to be appreciative, but also acknowledge that there have been times when he had to get by on little.

However, as I look at these passages the key to this secret of contentment in any situation comes back to what he says in verse 8.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

The key to contentment is where we focus our minds. Yes, we as human beings will naturally worry or be anxious about things but if we positively focus our minds, we will be able to let those worries go!

I like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his interpretation of this passage The Message

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.

In my work as a therapist and counselor, I have found that by teaching clients mindfulness practices, particularly those who struggle with anxiety they are better able to cope with all the struggles in their life and even change their perceptions of the situation. Prayer and meditation can serve that same place for us. When we are so caught up in our worries or anxieties, we miss seeing joys and mysteries and awesome events taking place right in front of us.

With the problems of Covid 19, meeting with someone in an office for one hour seems problematic and so we have gone to a lot of video conferencing for therapy. Some of my clients did not want to do that and yet going back into the office seemed risky too. I have been meeting some of my clients at a nearby park that is not busy and have found this is a good way to connect in the outdoors where there is plenty of space and yet the ability to speak confidentially. One of the hang-ups I have had to learn to deal with **over the years is clients missing sessions** (by forgetting to come, or not coming), So when a client is late, I get caught up in a series of negative or anxious thinking (“they don’t like me!”, “they have not gained value from our time together”, “they have relapsed {some of my clients are recovering alcoholics and addicts}”).

The crazy thing is I know this kind of thinking will happen, but recently I have been doing a meditation practice that has helped me put it in perspective. When a client was late couple of weeks ago. I started the usual – self-questioning and self-doubt, anxiety and worry were not far behind, but then I caught myself, sent a text to see if the client was on the way. And while I was awaiting the response, realized that I was in a beautiful location. With still water on a small lake that was reflecting the hillside in mirrorlike fashion. It was amazing! It turned out the client was delayed and texted me back. I continued to meditate on God’s beautiful world, began to consider the way light refracted in the water, took in the sounds of a few songbirds and was totally at peace. I realized afterwards that even if the client hadn’t texted me back, all was well with me.

Paul has given us a way to refocus away from the clamor of the day and to focus on listening for God’s voice through the Spirit. It takes practice because our busy minds want to take us to the next thing on the things to do list, or the next demand pops up, but if you take time to pray and meditate it becomes easier. Also, I have found that it gives us a chance to look at our own

motivations and commitments. I find, that when that happens; I am more likely to choose a direction that allows me to sort out what's next. The Serenity Prayer says it well "God grant me the Serenity to Accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference." Easily said, but it takes some intentionality to do. So often things we want to change are outside of our control. I find most of what I can change starts here... in me. And when I move toward God in prayer, I am more aware of my actions and more able to move toward gentleness and kindness in my relations with others.

As I was growing up, I fell in with evangelical Christians; however, I struggled with the tendency some of them have to set up dogmas that become a tool to judge others. Over the years, I have come to believe that this life of Contentment that Paul speaks of, is more about living a life of example and recognizing that none of us is perfect, but that every person is loved by God. Our job is to live that love for others out to the best of our abilities. Doing this, we begin to recognize others and their perspective as valuable and allow God to change what hearts need to be changed. As you can see this life of contentment is not one of passivity! It is one of relationship with the Holy. It is walking with God even through – as the Psalmist says, "valley of the shadow of death."

A little over a year ago, I had the opportunity to meet with inmates at Statesville prison where a seminary has begun a master's program for inmates. Most of these men are serving long sentences and needless to say it is an imposing place and a difficult situation in which to live. And yet these men turned their lives around even though living in an awful situation. They are ministering to others in the prison and conducting worship services there. Those who had the potential for parole were looking forward to ministering in the communities they came from to work to prevent others from falling into the criminal life through mentoring young men. Those men who had little hope of parole were looking to minister to the younger men who are incarcerated and helping them to get through this difficult time and find a path of light. I was impressed by the sincerity, and even the joy and laughter I saw as they were working on their studies. Though in prison, some of them for decades, they were able to rejoice in the Lord even while living in this difficult situation because of the strength they found in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Rejoice in the Lord always, Again I say Rejoice, doesn't always mean that we are necessarily in a pleasant situation, it means that we find contentment even joy in the situation but not complacency. We actively engage in prayer and actively work toward solutions that bring grace, love, and peace into the world. For the last six months I have been reading a daily meditation sent out by the Center for Action and Contemplation. One of the faculty, Cynthia Bourgeault, was quoted a few days ago addressing our fear, even the fear of death. She says, "*The values that are called the fruits of the Spirit by St. Paul—gentleness and peace and forbearance, compassion, love, joy—these are alchemical products that grow on the other side of the human being not afraid to die. We can find and collectively draw on those wonderful gifts.*" Paul lays it

out for us here. We are to be aware of the struggles and problems of the world but not so caught up in them that we cannot recognize whatever is true,

Whatever is noble

Whatever is right

Whatever is pure

Whatever is Lovely

Whatever is admirable

This is not a sugar coating to cover a bitter pill, it is a celebration of difficulty, of resilience and of the struggle to bring about a just and gracious world that recognizes the needs and value of every human being. It is about seeing others as God sees them and participating in the Christian calling of loving out neighbor and ourselves, because of our love for God and that God first loved us.

It is a truism in psychology that negative events in one's lives tend to outweigh positive events by a factor of three, and some even say five. That is, for every negative event you experience you need at least three positive events to happen to balance out the impact of that one negative event. One of my colleagues once said, "it's like negative events are Velcro and positive events are like Teflon!"

The way to such contentment is to focus your mind on things noble, true, lovely and pure. Last night on the news I saw a clip about an AME church in the Carolinas in a poor largely black community that brought testing for the COVID virus. This is a noble event. Then I began to think about all the noble work of this congregation. Our water project partnering with four Guatemalan communities to bring clean water to hundreds – what a lovely thing. Visiting those at the McHenry County Jail who are waiting adjudication of their immigration status, that is admirable and gracious. Volunteering for the food bank, doing projects for Home of the Sparrow is a way to be true to the people suffering in this community. Donating Diapers reaches out to the needs of both young parents in need and the elderly. Working to make our church and homes more energy efficient is a way to be good stewards of the earth. One of the things I am so proud of, is the way this church is a church of mission. We are not here to just take care of ourselves, we are here to share the love of Christ through action, and sometimes through words of concern, care and support for those who are struggling. To be Brothers and Sisters of all.

As you go forward this week, Think on these things! Think on these things and rejoice in the work of God around us, in Creation, in Caring and compassionate human beings, in our hearts!