

A Gospel-Shaped Peace

Philippians 4:2-7

If you are just joining us this morning, I want to welcome you. We are rounding the final stretch and heading into the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, a letter often known for its emphasis on joy, which crescendos here in our passage this morning, v. 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" But as we've said before, the reason that Philippians is so full of joy, is because it's so full of Jesus. The gospel of Jesus and our participation in it is the main thrust of the book. We've noted at different times how this letter emphasizes our call to *partner* or *fellowship* together as a community that is itself shaped by the gospel, where our personal lives and relationships with one another are marked by the grace of God in Christ. But not only that, we are to be a community that walks side-by-side on mission for the gospel, bearing witness to the transforming message of Jesus through our words and actions. We are to live as "citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ . . . standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (1:27) in our relationships, in our discipleship, in our worship, and in our public witness. It's a beautiful calling, and a costly one. Because it means following Jesus' pattern of dying to self in order to make much of God and point others to him, even in the face of opposition.

But what happens to our focus and mission when disputes arise and we encounter division within? A team that works together might be able to withstand great opposition from the outside, but when the bond is broken among team members, everything is at risk of falling apart. Imagine a basketball game where one player refuses to pass the ball to a teammate, even if he has a clear shot, because of a personal grudge off the court. Doesn't take much imagination, does it? Or imagine practicing hard all year long as part of an orchestra, and on opening night your principal cellist doesn't show, because she has a personal problem with someone in the flute section. How will that concert go? What's true for any team is no less true for the church.

As a community on mission for Christ, we face the daily temptation to let internal conflict divert our focus away from the outward cause of our mission—to make Christ known to the glory of God. It was this very threat in the church at Philippi that moved Paul to direct his attention in ch. 4 to a dispute between two women in that church who had been laboring side-by-side with him in the gospel, but whose disagreement apparently threatened to impede that work.

This passage is a stark reminder that we never outgrow our need for the gospel of Jesus. Rather, standing firm (as v. 1 urges), or *being faithful to our gospel mission in the world, requires believing and applying the gospel to our relationships within.*

The Reality of Conflict (vv. 2-3)

The reality is that as long as we wait for Christ's return and the resurrection to come that we saw last week in 3:20-21, as long as two sinners share the same space, work on the same projects, or attempt to relate to each other in any way, shape, or form, we will have conflict. In friendships, in marriage, even in the church. We are sinners, after all. We're rescued, if we have trusted Christ personally and placed all our faith and hope in him—in his life, death, and resurrection for us. We're rescued, but we're not complete. We haven't arrived. We're still running the race. And in the meantime, we will be tempted to cut into each others' lanes, put up stumbling blocks, to cheat, trip, claw, and fight for our own selfish desires. We're tempted to forget we're all running for the same team, for the same prize, and we lose focus with respect to our mission. Leaders will disappoint. People will be misunderstood. Ideas will be dismissed. Contributions overlooked. None of that is okay; that's not the way it's supposed to be. But it is, sadly, the way it often is, and will continue to be at least in part until the Lord returns.

We fool ourselves if we're not honest about that. The world can see how hard it is for Christians to get along. I would venture to guess that if you're here and you don't know Jesus and you're kind of investigating this thing called Christianity, one of the things you're asking yourself as you look in and meet people is this: are they real? Are they genuine? Or are they hypocrites? Do they say one thing, like "Love your neighbor," and yet not love each other? And I'll bet you can see it. A conversation in the restroom before the service, overhearing someone talk about someone else behind their back. You're not fooled. And just to dispel any lingering suspense you might have, I want you to know: Yes, we are hypocrites. Every blessed one of us. Because we are still sinners. We're still broken. We are just as much in need of Jesus as you are.

We who believe are caught between two worlds, two ages—the old world of the flesh, where sin rules and fear motivates, and the new world of the Spirit, where grace rules and the Spirit of God empowers. And so, though we are forgiven, rescued, redeemed people of God, we will continue to face conflict with each other. As the limerick goes:

To live above with saints we love,
Oh that will be glory.
To live below with saints we know,
Well, that's another story.¹

The church is not immune from internal conflict. Not this church, not the church in ancient Philippi. So in what has been a rather gushing, warm letter so far, in ch. 4:2 Paul now gets a bit uncomfortably specific: he addresses a conflict in the church, and he names names. Imagine sitting in the congregation when Epaphroditus or whoever arrives and reads this letter and when he gets to this part. Oh yeah, it's awkward. What's Paul doing?

Now we're not told the precise nature of the conflict. We can safely assume that it is not a dispute over the essential of doctrines of faith; it's not a dispute over what the gospel is. If it were, we would have heard something similar to ch. 3:2: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers . . .", or even something more akin to Paul's words in Galatians 1:6: "I am astonished

¹ As cited in R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 164.

that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6-7).

So it’s not essential doctrine. But whatever it is, it affects more than just these two women. What’s at stake is nothing less than the Philippian church’s partnership in advancing the gospel of Jesus, in proclaiming Christ that others might know him. Notice how he describes these two women in v. 3 : they “have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (ESV). Hear the echo of 1:27 in those verses: “laboring side by side . . . in the gospel.” This conflict is not about major things, but it is no less serious, because it threatens to distract or divert their energy and attention to something other than their mission in Christ.

How common is this? Think about that: how unfortunately common is this kind of dispute? How many churches have been divided over the color of the carpet, or the strength of the coffee, or the style of music? How many churches have been divided over who gets to hold what office, who gets to plan what event, who gets to take home the leftover eggplant parmesan from the Christmas dinner? Seems pretty petty. That’s because it is! But it’s no less a threat.

And so Paul offers a passionate plea to both women: “I *plead* with Euodia, and I *plead* with Syntechē, to agree in the Lord.” And he’s calling in reinforcements—a third party to come alongside them in helping them to agree in the Lord. He doesn’t name this person; he calls him “loyal yokefellow” (not exactly a term of endearment we use today)—perhaps better: true companion, or faithful co-laborer; true partner. Whoever he was, his charge was to help these two women, these two partners in the gospel, agree in the Lord.

Now what does Paul mean by that—to “agree in the Lord?” He’s not saying, “Can’t we just love each other and get along; forget about all the doctrine that divides?” No, doctrine matters to Paul. What we believe about God matters, especially when it deals with salvation in Christ. But neither is he saying that we must agree on every nitpicky point of detail—whether of doctrine, or of life: premillennialism or amillennialism? Public school or home school or private school? Red carpet or blue? Rather, Paul is talking about the *perspective* they should take as they look at issues. He wants them to agree or, better, “*think the same* in the Lord.” Take the same perspective *in* the Lord Jesus. Paul is taking a general instruction he’s already given to the whole church earlier in 1:27 and 2:2—asking them to walk “with one mind . . . being of the same mind . . . of one mind” (all same word)—and he’s now applying it to a specific situation. And it’s not so much thinking the same *thing*, but thinking the same *in the Lord Jesus*. Having a common perspective that comes from Christ and that reflects his posture of humility and self-giving love. Remember Paul’s exhortation in ch. 2:5: “Your attitude [or mind] should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” So even if we disagree on something (the color of the carpet, the proper age or mode of baptism), we approach our discussion from the perspective of Christ, focused on the gospel of his grace (which is what unites us) and reflecting an attitude of humility and self-giving love.

So what does that look like, practically speaking? How do we do that? What if I am absolutely and utterly convinced that our gathered worship should look a certain way, or that we need this program for our children or youth? Or put it in the context of marriage, what if I’m positive that there really is a right and best way to defrost hamburger, or to stack dishes, or to squeeze the toothpaste (you go from the bottom up, not the middle)? How can I adopt the perspective of

Christ in these crucial disagreements? Paul goes on to offer three specific instructions and one beautiful result, in vv. 4-7.

Toward a Gospel-Shaped Peace (4:4-7)

His first instruction is general, and we've heard it before in this book. Here he says it twice: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" We've talked about this idea in the past, but it's interesting that Paul brings it up again in this context in such an emphatic way. He wants these two women (and us) to rejoice in the Lord Jesus, *to be joyfully satisfied and enthralled with Christ*. He's not talking about a generic, chipper disposition, but a joy that is anchored in Jesus himself. And he wants us to do this *always*—at all times, in every situation, to find our satisfaction, identity, and delight in Jesus Christ. He is our greatest treasure.

This is where we see how being faithful to our gospel mission in the world requires believing and applying the gospel to our relationships within. It is the good news of Christ—who he is, what he's done for us—that frees us to love one another even when we disagree. We never outgrow our need for the gospel. The gospel tells us that left to ourselves, we are sinners, rebels against God's throne, traitors to his heavenly crown. God created us to be his children and servants of his kingdom; we committed treason instead. And treason against heaven is punishable by eternal death in hell. That is who we are, that is what we bring to God: nothing but sin. But God came down to us. He sent his eternal Son, Jesus, to become human and be the child and servant we failed to be, and to take upon himself the penalty of our treason, the full weight of hell, on the cross. He exhausted God's wrath; there is no punishment left for the believer in Christ. And Christ rose from the dead on the third day, to give new life and to share his heavenly inheritance with all who will believe. When you place your faith in Christ, not only does God forgive your sins, not only does he cleanse you from your sins, he adopts you into his own family. He takes you out of the dungeon and gives you a seat at his table. He lavishes his love on you, giving you new life and strength by his Spirit, and guaranteeing you to share in his inheritance in heaven—the future hope of the resurrection and new creation. And not because you deserved a lick of it! God doesn't rescue us because we make it up to him or try harder or do more good things than bad. It is through faith, *believing, trusting*, and entirely of his *grace*. Grace is when God gives us something wonderful even though we deserve something terrible; it is God's favor toward those who deserve his wrath. And this same grace not only rescues us from hell, but it changes us daily by the power of God's Spirit. We never outgrow our need for the gospel. And as long as we're depending on the gospel, as long as we're delighting in Christ as the greatest treasure this world affords, then it's pretty hard to be arrogant or selfish toward one another. As Don Carson puts it:

If we fail to respond with joy and gratitude when we are reminded of these things, it is either because we have not properly grasped the depth of the abyss of our own sinful natures and of the curse from which we have been freed by Jesus or because we have not adequately surveyed the splendor of the heights to which we haven been raised.²

The gospel anchors our satisfaction in Jesus and fuels our humility and unity.

² D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 104.

Now there are some arguments worth having in the church. If we find some among us trying to move us away from the essentials of the gospel—that Christ died for sins, once for all, and that by believing you may have life in him, or away from orthodox Christian beliefs like the Trinity, the inspiration of Scripture, or the deity and humanity of Christ, etc., then we need to stop and give careful, loving, biblical attention to those matters. But when it comes to secondary disputes, they're not *unimportant* matters; but neither are they *all* important. We should be free to discuss and wrestle through them. But what divides us is rarely the actual object we're arguing about. It's not really the secondary doctrine or the insubstantial opinion; it's usually *self*. My idea. My reputation. My desire. We fight so hard not because the issue is worth it, but because we've bound our identity and significance up in the issue, so to vindicate the issue is to vindicate me. The same thing happens in much of the conflict we find in our marriages or friendships; we subtly give way to the very selfish ambition and vain conceit that Paul warned us against in 2:3-4. But when we believe and apply the gospel to our own lives and relationships, recognizing that our identity is in Christ and that he is all our satisfaction, all our identity, significance, and joy, then as we've said before, there is no room left for self.

So first: rejoice in the Lord. Be joyfully satisfied in Jesus. But then Paul goes on to tell us what that looks like more specifically in vv. 5-6. He tells us first to be known for our gentleness or reasonableness in such matters, and second, to turn our anxiety into prayer.

Verse 5: “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” How do you respond when you don’t get your way in a matter? Are you grouchy? Do you obsess over it, lose sleep, check your email every 5 minutes for responses, hijack every conversation and talk it into the ground? Does it cause you to grasp for control? Do you rally the troops and start a campaign to get your way? Do you manipulate others? Do you play the martyr—pointing out to everyone how much this decision cost you? That’s how my heart responds.

But it’s not a response that reflects the gospel. That’s not what it looks like to share a common perspective in Jesus. If we really see our own sin as utterly sinful, and God’s grace in Christ as absolutely sufficient, then there should be a humility in our hearts that causes us to be known for our gentleness or reasonableness in such matters; not for our edginess or manipulation. People shouldn’t be afraid to disagree with us. They shouldn’t have to walk on eggshells to keep us happy, or hide behind policy to avoid our wrath. We should be approachable, eager to listen, learn, and be corrected. We should show forth the humility, gentleness, and reasonableness of Christ. And all the more because of the *nearness* of Christ; Paul says, “The Lord is near.” Now whether he’s talking about Christ’s presence among us right now by the Spirit, or about the fact that Christ is returning at anytime—either way, Christ is near. He is *with* us, he is *for* us, and he is *in* us by his Spirit to give us a common perspective and to keep us on track and on mission for the advance of the gospel.

So be joyfully satisfied in Jesus, be known for your gentleness. His third instruction: turn your anxiety into prayer.

Turn your anxiety into prayer. Verse 6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Now we often apply this verse to all sorts of situations, and rightfully so. No matter what it is we’re anxious or worried about, God invites us to bring it to him specifically and gratefully in prayer. He delights to

answer the prayers of his children. He is the God who cares about us and is actually powerful enough to do something about it, whether that means changing the situation or sometimes just changing us. So whatever you are anxious about, turn it into prayer.

But let's not miss Paul's immediate application—taking our disputes or disagreements before the Lord in prayer. Again, our default is to fight and obsess over the matter, to stew on it, clawing for control. But holding onto a situation and obsessing over it is my personal statement that I don't trust God with the results. Or as a friend of mine once put it, worry or anxiety is “scraping your forehead against the brick wall of your own self-salvation program.” Ouch.

When we hold tightly to a matter, instead of giving it to God, we drive ourselves and everyone else crazy. But when we give it to God—when we say, “Lord: here is the issue, here's how I feel about it, here's why I feel I'm right and what I want to see happen, and I give it all to you. This is your church; these are your people; this is your mission. Do as you please, and give me the grace to love my brothers and sisters or to love my spouse and to trust you with the results,”—when we take our burdens to God in prayer, there is peace that, as Paul describes it in v. 7, defies understanding. And that's the one beautiful result: the peace of God that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (v. 7).

It's amazing how I can be so discouraged or upset, so anxious and even angry at someone, but when I go back to the gospel—my sin, God's grace, and give my burdens to the Lord, the situation to the Lord in prayer, and hand the results over to him—how quickly love and affection are restored, how peaceful it is to wake up *not thinking* about the issue in the morning. When God's people take the gospel seriously in their relationships, the peace of God—the wholeness and shalom of God for his people—guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It shores up and garrisons our perspectives and affections toward one another. It guards us from self-centered distractions, and keeps us focused on our mission for Christ.

And that is the goal—to serve faithfully on mission for the Lord. The church is a called out, set apart people. We have been saved for a purpose—to bear witness to Christ in the Metrowest, in New England, and to the ends of the world. God forbid that we ever let arguments about the color of the walls or the size of the pulpit distract us from the fact that roughly two percent of New Englanders attend a gospel-preaching church. God forbid we ever let disputes over youth programs or ministry budgets cause us to forget that one out of every six people in New England don't believe in God, let alone Christ, that most of the people we rub shoulders with daily at work or in the grocery store are facing a Christ-less eternity in hell. God forbid we ever exert more energy arguing over the music we sing than we do wrestling in prayer for our unsaved neighbors.

May we never lose sight of the gospel—of who we are in Christ, of our union with him and with one another, of the reality of our sin and the sweet sufficiency of his grace. May we never lose sight of the peace we have in God through the shed blood of Christ. May it guard our souls in the bitterest trials and the darkest nights, and may it free us for the mission he's called us to as his humble servants—to make Christ known to the glory of God the Father.

Discussion Questions

1. When it comes to disagreements within the church, what would it look like for both parties to approach the subject with the perspective of Christ (4:2-3; cf. 2:5-11)? What happens when the other party is unwilling to do so? How do you respond?
2. Is there ever a time when firm confrontation and disagreement is necessary in the life of the church? How can we tell the difference?
3. Think about Paul's three instructions in vv. 4-6: (1) be joyfully satisfied in Christ; (2) be known for your gentleness; and (3) turn your anxiety into prayer. Which of these three is the hardest for you? Think of your most recent dispute with a spouse or friend: which of those (if any) were missing from how you handled the dispute? Can you share an example of when you followed these instructions and saw the peace of God at work in the situation?
4. Put yourself in the place of Paul's "loyal yokefellow." How would this passage (and the broader book of Philippians) guide you in helping two brothers or sisters who are at odds to "think the same in the Lord?"
5. How does this passage help us understand how to approach disagreements that are of secondary nature (i.e. not dealing with the essential elements of the gospel or historic Christian orthodoxy), but are no less crucial to the church's faithfulness to her mission or witness?