

“The Peace of God,” Philippians 4:2-9 (August 9, 2015)

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⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

PRAY

We are wrapping up our series in the book of Philippians this week and next week. And these last two sermons on Philippians are just like the last several we’ve had – they are basically covering what the Christian life looks like and how we should live it. That’s because typically the apostle Paul writes his letters in a particular way – the first half of a Pauline epistle covers doctrine: “This is what you should believe about Jesus Christ.” It’s true of the first half of Colossians, Ephesians, and, of course, Philippians. Then, the second half of those letters, Paul covers practice: “This is how you should live in light of what you believe about Jesus Christ.”

Last week we saw that Christians are citizens of heaven, and we unpacked what that meant. Two weeks ago we talked about pressing on toward the goal we have in Christ Jesus and Christian holiness.

Today, in verses 2-9 of chapter four, we again examine what the Christian life should look like. And here’s how we’ll examine these eight verses this morning: *first, I’ll point out five commands from Paul* (these are not all the commands in these verses, but five of them). *Second, one reality that makes obedience to the commands possible.* *Third, a promise that follows obedience.*

First, five commands for Christians from Paul. We will work quickly through these five and I’ll just point out a few things about each one because I think they are self-explanatory. It’s very easy to understand what these commands are; for the most part, they are clear.

First, Christians are to be joyful. Verse 4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” Too often Christians have been portrayed in movies and books as the rule-

keepers, the hall monitors, the judgmental types, the killjoys. I know of no better example of that than Nathaniel Hawthorne's nearly libelous portrayal of American Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter*. To be "puritanical" these days means you are some unthinking, hypocritical, harsh, judgmental, and mean.

Other times Christians are thought by outsiders to be sincere people, dedicated people, honest people, but sour, stern, and certainly no fun to be around. Looking back on my childhood, some of the most serious Christians I knew were honest almost to a fault, they worked hard, they were faithful in giving and church involvement, yet they seemed to be afraid of enjoying themselves. Some gave me the impression that if you are laughing or at all lighthearted then the devil must be at work. One very unfair definition of a Christian that I've heard is that a Christian is someone who is afraid that someone, somewhere, is having a good time.

However, Paul clearly says that Christians are called, we are commanded, *to be joyful*. Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Galatians 5:22: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness . . ." We are called to continually exhibit a deep, abiding, serious, thoughtful, yet real and attractive joy in every area of our life and in every circumstance in our life – we are to "rejoice in the Lord always," at home, at work, at play, at rest, whether the circumstances around us are good and easy to rejoice in or not. That's one command.

Second, Christians are to be gentle. Verse 5a: "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone." The Greek word translated as "reasonableness" in the ESV is a notoriously difficult word to translate. The KJV has "moderation," the ASV has "forbearance," NASB has "gentle spirit," and the NIV 1984 and NKJV has "gentleness."

"Gentleness" probably comes the closest to what Paul's communicating here. Christians are to be kind, patient, and considerate toward everyone – no matter how irritating or difficult the person may in reality be, and people can be incredibly irritating and difficult, can they not? But we are to be gentle, never harsh, never sarcastic, never rude.

Yet, don't misunderstand – Christians have principles, we have ideals, we have certain hills on which we will die, we will not be pushed around or violate our consciences in order to avoid conflict. We are to be gentle with all people, especially the difficult, but never pushovers.

Third, Christians are commanded to never worry. Verse 6a: "Do not be anxious about anything . . ." This one is pretty clear, so I won't elaborate much on it, except to point out that Paul isn't the only one who says this – Jesus does, too. "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" Matthew 6:31.

Never worrying, never having anxiety (not money, not your health, not your relationships, not your kids, not about anything) – it's a command of God. Probably this

is the command that most Christians who really sit down and think about it find they would most want to keep but instead find it is the one most difficult to keep.

Fourth, Christians are commanded to always pray. Verse 6: “[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Paul repeats this in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where he says, “[P]ray without ceasing ...”

Again, like the command to never worry, this command to prayer is also clear and doesn't require elaboration, but I will say this: for a long time I did not think it was practical to pray “in everything,” to pray about everything. I remember in my first sermon on prayer years ago I basically said, “Don't pray about trivial things – if you're tire is flat, don't pray about it. Get out of the car and change it.” I wish I hadn't said that, because now I know that the most mature, godly, joyful Christians I know pray about everything. They do pray over flat tires, that God would give them the ability to change the tire and yet give thanks to God for his goodness. They do pray that God would help them find parking places in crowded lots. They pray for God to help them find a contact lens dropped in the grass. They do pray over the meals they prepare, that God would use the food to nourish their loved ones. They pray for grace to be kind and patient when their children repeatedly wake them up in the middle of the night for a glass of water. They pray for their daily bread and they pray for the right words to say to others, even their family in casual conversation. Godly people do this because they know and take seriously what Jesus said in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” Godly people are powerfully aware of their limitations and are utterly convinced that God is mightily interested in the smallest details of their lives, so in everything, and about everything, they pray.

Fifth, Christians are commanded to control their thoughts. Verse 8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” There's a lot of debate in the commentaries about precisely what were the “honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable” things Paul had in mind in verse 8, but what is clear is that Paul expects Christians to control their thought lives. 2 Corinthians 10:5: “We ... take every thought captive to obey Christ ...”

One implication of this is that Christians must address their worry and anxiety, which takes over the thoughts of many, many people, and about which we've already spoken. But another is that of media: Christians must be careful about the media they allow themselves to consume. Are the television shows and movies they watch, the magazines they read, the Twitter accounts and other social media feeds they follow “honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable” in the eyes of the Lord? We cannot control our thoughts without some kind of filter on the media we consume.

I have told many men who struggle with sexual fantasies and sexual sin (and I don't know why this wouldn't be true of women) that the best thing they can do is to “starve

the beast.” This means of course not watching pornography (that should be a given), but it also means to cut out all of the movies and television shows that have sex or nudity or scantily clad women or innuendo any kind as a regular component of the content. Same with language or violence. Now, as you know, if you follow that rule, that means that you can’t watch ninety-five percent of the media produced. But just go ahead and chalk it up to being one of the costs of following Christ (and as these kinds of costs go, friends, it’s not a big one). For many of us this morning this might be the single easiest and most effective thing that could be done immediately to help control thoughts.

³ But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:3-4.

Those are five of the commands Paul gives (there are others), but let’s confess at this point that these commands do indeed appear impossible. In fact, here’s a good test for where you are in your Christian maturity. If you are a nominal Christian, a cultural Christian who just identifies as a Christian because you grew up in Mississippi and have always gone to church, then you’ll hear these commands and say, “Of course, these are impossible,” and not take any serious steps to try to obey them. To a nominal Christians, these verses are just some of the Christian talk we have to give lip-service to, but by no means are we really required to try and obey. But if you are a sincere Christian who has a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, you hear these verses and of course know you fall short, and you may well not see a way to obey them. But you want to! You want to obey them and you’d love to have the key in your pocket that unlocks the power of obedience. If that’s you, here it is.

Second, one reality that makes obedience to the commands possible. Verses 2-3: ² I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche [SIN-ti-key] to agree in the Lord. ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who 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.

Apparently there was some dispute between two of the women at Philippi, we have no idea what it involved, but that’s not what I want to focus on. Rather, I just want to look at that phrase “fellow workers.” Paul uses this phrase a lot – about a dozen times – in the New Testament.

Christians are fellow workers, and if we are workers, then who is our employer? Who owns the business in which we “fellow workers” work? God. 1 Corinthians 3:9 tells us that: “For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”

Now what’s so significant about that? Think about it like this: workers, employees, in a business of any kind are nowhere near as concerned with the reputation of the business, with the prosperity of the business, as the owner is. Those of you who own a business, whose name is at the top of the letterhead or in the name of the business itself, you know

this – the people you employ are nowhere as motivated to make sure the job is done well, done right, as you are.

If you're the owner you never stop worrying, do you? You're always responsible. You want the business to succeed like no one else, so you worry about the business, because your name is on it. You often have to be the first one there and the last one to leave, you're often the one that must work the hardest.

When you are the owner you are always on the clock. It doesn't matter if you're on vacation or if it's the middle of the night, you're the boss, so if something goes wrong you're responsible to take care of it.

But your workers will at some point get off the clock, and they will go home and when they do they will not worry about the business is doing. They will not worry about the reputation of the business, they will not worry about the quality of the work done. They will not worry getting the next customer or client. A worker just shows up on time and does what his employer tells him to do, expecting that his boss will make sure he has what he needs to do his job. An owner is consumed with the success of the business, and worker just flat out is not.

Now, let's apply this truth: Paul calls us workers in God's field, and then he goes further and says that we are God's field. We are workers and we are God's field. What can that mean? *It means, Christians, that everything about us is owned by God.* We are the ones who work for the Lord and the venue in which we work, the field in which we work, is our lives. Everything we do belongs to the Lord.

So, if God is the owner, and we are the workers, and our lives are the work, *then we should learn to live like workers.* So, yes, as Christians, we have work to do. We should be honest and apply ourselves to the tasks God has given us. *But we're just workers, and we must never take the burden of being an owner upon ourselves.*

You see this is where we mess up as Christians. We forget that God is the owner, and instead we are constantly tempted every day to slip back into thinking that we own our lives and that we are responsible for how our lives turn out, how our jobs turn out, for how our families turn out. But we don't own our lives! 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a: "You are not your own,²⁰ for you were bought with a price."

Christian friends, we are called to *be faithful in our lives, but we are not responsible for our lives and how they turn out, because our lives aren't really our lives anymore, are they?* And once you see the beauty of being just a worker in the field of the Lord, and the freedom it brings, and the joy it brings, especially when God is the owner, it's wonderful.

How many people in business wanted control, wanted to be the boss, then found out how hard it really is? I know one guy in particular, an attorney, who started out at a big firm, looked around and thought he could run things better by himself, so he went out on his own and started his own firm. But after a few years of being the one responsible for

bringing in business, and meeting payroll, and taking care of the overhead, and paying all the bills, he took a job again at a big firm where someone else worried about all that.

Friends, if God is the one in control of your life, if he is the one who has bought you, if everything about you belongs to him, then he is the one responsible for how it will turn out. And so you can relax, and to the degree we relax and just do what God has assigned us to do – love and serve the people around us – you will be able to keep Paul’s commands.

So if we see that we are just workers, then will be gentle with one another. Why do we typically get angry with other people? I can tell you why I do – when my life doesn’t go the way I think it should, when it looks like my life is going down the drain, I get angry, irritable, and everything but gentle.

But what am I forgetting when I react that way? I’m forgetting that I’m not responsible for my life, I’m not an owner. I’m just a worker in the field that is my life and I’ve been bought at a price, the price of the blood of Jesus. It’s foolish for me to get angry when in my life I’ve been inconvenienced or offended, *because it’s not my life.* I must let all that go, because in a very real sense, friends, as Christians, we are dead.

Colossians 3:1-3: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” If that takes root in your heart, that you don’t have any life except the life hidden with Christ in God, then you can be gentle always.

Second, if you truly believed you’re just a worker, *then why would we ever be anxious again?* Workers don’t worry about having what they need to do their job, they don’t worry about supplies or tools or competition from other businesses, and they sure don’t worry about the reputation of the business. They just show up and go to work.

Workers might be worried about not having any work, they might be anxious about being laid off, but Christians never get laid off. We’ll never run out of things to do. Our only responsibility is to continue laboring in the vineyard of the Lord until he returns.

And we will pray. I mean, my goodness, if workers are not afraid to ask their bosses for tools or supplies they need at the job site, then certainly we can go to God with our petitions and requests in order to better do his will. “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.” 2 Corinthians 9:8. *Friends, you can be absolutely certain that you will have everything you need to accomplish God’s will in your life. You never, ever have to worry about that.* If you’re worried, you’re forgetting you are a worker.

And of course we will rejoice in the Lord always. Look at what he’s done for us. I love Ephesians 2:13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” We were once so far away from God, so separated from

him by our sins, destined for judgment and then for hell because we have offended our holy, righteous Creator God. But God has brought us near by the blood of Christ – on the cross Jesus Christ took our place under the wrath of God and satisfied God’s just anger, and because Jesus took the blame we now receive nothing but love from God forever. We have been brought near to God in Jesus Christ, so that we can hold us and love us. That is a cause for rejoicing always. If we remember that we are “fellow workers” instead of owners, we can keep Paul’s commands, and then receive the promise.

Third, the promise that follows obedience. Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” What does that mean?

If you do see yourself as a fellow worker and you give your life over to obedience to God, then these verses promise that no matter what happens, no matter how bad life might get, *you will have peace*. When strife and turmoil and disaster strike, your heart can be at rest because the supernatural, transcendent, peace of God – so powerful it surpasses understanding – will be given to you. This peace surpasses understanding because God gives it and comforts his people in circumstances in which, by ordinary reckoning, no one could be experience peace.

Many of you know the story of Jim Elliot, and how he and four other missionaries in Ecuador were martyred as they tried to share the gospel with a tribe of Indians who at that time were still living in the Stone Age. But when Elliot’s widow, Elisabeth, first heard the news that Jim was missing, she says that the Lord immediately brought to her mind a verse. It was Isaiah 42:3: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” And she knew in that moment the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. By all outward reasoning she should not have been able to function, but her heart was at rest. And while she still grieved and she still cried and she still hurt, she was able to not only stay in Ecuador when all the other missionaries left but a few years later she and her three year old daughter moved into the jungle to live with the very tribe that killed her husband, in order to share the gospel with them.

How could she do that? *The peace of God* – she knew her life was not her own, that she was just a worker in God’s field, so she was willing to go wherever God would lead her confident that God, because he is such a good employer, would give her precisely what she needed to do his work.

Friends, do you know you are only a worker in the vineyard of the Lord? Better than that, do you glory in it? I pray you do, because then you can know the peace of God which transcends all understanding and you can sing: “When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine. The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes; that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.” PRAY