

“Holy Alchemy”
Philippians 4:4-9
March 13, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Toward the end of many of Paul’s letters, he includes a series of parting commands. These are typically more bullet-point and somewhat random. They remind me of what a parent might say to a son as he is about to leave for a two-week summer camp. “Write as often as you can, don’t forget to change your underwear, brush your teeth every night, make sure you get enough sleep, don’t forget to put your sunscreen on.” Paul’s concluding commands fit the situation of the Philippians. They are living in a world that is often unfriendly to Christians, and these commands all relate to life in such a world.

The sermon title above may need some explanation for some. Alchemy was a medieval predecessor to modern chemistry. Alchemists of that era dreamed of being able to turn lead into gold. Since lead was far more abundant than gold, they imagined that success in this venture would make them unimaginably rich. Like so many ambitions for riches, it was never realized. For the Christian, though, there is a way to turn the common dross of life in a fallen world into precious treasure. Both Paul and the Philippian church were well-acquainted with the difficulties of life in this world. In a series of commands here, Paul speaks of a kind of alchemy, a holy alchemy that can turn these trials into great treasure.

I. Joy from Trials – v. 4-5

For the third time, Paul commands his readers to **“rejoice in the Lord”** (3:1; 4:4). Repetition indicates emphasis. Paul saw this as critically important for the Philippians. His third statement of the command is couched in the future tense: **“again I will say.”** This will always be the command for God’s people. We are to be full of joy because we are called to be like God, and he is a joyful God.

What is this joy we are commanded to have? It can’t be synonymous with happiness because that is a normal human emotion that comes and goes. Sadness and grief are also part of a normal emotional life, and a person can’t be happy and sad at the same time. But apparently we can be sad and joyful at the same time, because Paul tells us to rejoice always. So what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller explains it as follows:

To rejoice is to treasure a thing, to assess its value to you, to reflect on its beauty and importance until your heart rests in it and tastes the sweetness of it. 'Rejoicing' is a way of praising God until the heart is sweetened and rested, and until it relaxes its grip on anything else it thinks it needs (p. 173).

Note the significance of that word "always." We are to rejoice in the Lord *always*. Even when the doctor tells you that the biopsy came back positive for cancer? Even when you find out you didn't make the cut for the school soccer team? The clear meaning of that word "always" gives us the answer. But note that the object of our joy is not the cancer or the failed attempt to make the soccer team, but rather the Lord. He is the only source of stability and security in all of life. I would challenge you to think of a single thing in life that is not temporary other than a relationship with the Lord and with people. All material goods are temporary. All nations are temporary. Your health is temporary, for everyone eventually succumbs to such ill health that the body says, "Enough; I can't do this anymore." But the Lord is forever, and his promises are forever.

I read a metaphor recently from the pastor-poet George Herbert that I've been meditating on for the past couple of weeks. He said that the cross of Christ has changed time from an executioner to a gardener. If that's not cause for rejoicing in the Lord, I don't know what is. This life is not the end. It's not even the beginning of the end. Rather, it's the end of the beginning.

It's not just in our trials that we are being told to rejoice in the Lord, but also in our successes. The danger in our trials is that we forget the Lord and succumb to despair and hopelessness. The danger in our successes is that we forget the Lord and succumb to pride. So we are to remember to rejoice in the Lord not only when there is nothing else to rejoice in, but also when there are an abundance of potential things to rejoice in other than the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord always.

Spurgeon adds an intriguing thought to this verse when he says that the Lord is not to be just the object of our joy but also the sphere of our joy. He says, "That joy which you cannot share with God is not a right joy for you." Concerning that movie that you are watching, would the notion that you are watching it with the Lord add to your joy or lead you to turn off the movie and do something else? Do you feel the pleasure of God in that activity? Such a thing is possible and even commanded here.

Verse 5 directs us toward a certain character quality that is an outgrowth of joy in the Lord. **"Let your reasonableness be known to everyone."** What is this reasonableness that is to be visible to everyone? Other translations use words that are a little more helpful, words like "forbearance" and "gentleness." One commentator says, "The word reflects an attitude of contentment with one's state, even when one has not been treated justly....In other words, Paul expects believers to be guided by a frame of mind that does not put priority on

personal rights” (Silva, p. 224). The Christian response to being treated unjustly is not retaliation but kindness. The reason given for such a response is that Jesus will make all things right when he returns, which is what I understand him to mean by the statement, **“The Lord is at hand.”**

II. Prayer from Worries – v. 6-7

Both Paul and the Philippians had plenty to worry about. Paul was in prison, facing execution if Caesar didn’t decide in his favor. The Philippian church was suffering under threats from without and within. Persecution was an immediate outside threat (1:29-30) and disunity threatened from within. On top of that, they were suffering under the challenges of extreme poverty (2 Cor. 8:1-2). Yet Paul tells them, in keeping with the commands of Jesus (Matt. 6:25-34), not to worry.

Note the comprehensive nature of this command. **“Don’t be anxious about anything,”** he says. Rather, in **“everything”** they are to pray. Many of our anxieties are about small things, any one of which is not that big of an issue. But when such things accumulate, it can become a case of death by a thousand cuts. There is no anxiety too small to be brought to the Lord. The Lord who created universes too numerous to be counted numbers the hairs of our head. He wants us, even commands us here, to bring our little worries to him. If it is troubling to you, God says to come to him with it. Maybe it’s something as little as finding a parking space when you drive to a place with inadequate parking. Maybe it’s wondering who you will sit with at lunchtime in the school lunchroom. There is nothing too small to be brought to God. We should see these small worries as calls from God to come to him.

There is also no concern too big that we shouldn’t bring those to the Lord in prayer as well. Even if the problem is of such size and complexity that we have no idea how it is to be resolved, we can just bring the problem to the Lord. We don’t have to bring to the Lord the proposed solution because he knows best how to resolve it anyway.

This verse changes our worries, whether big or small, from problems to opportunities. They are opportunities to draw near to the Lord and find ourselves rejoicing in him. Worries are like the boll weevil statue in Enterprise, Alabama. It was a pest that destroyed the cotton crops raised there, but which then led to the prosperity of the area when the crop was changed to peanuts. A problem became an opportunity.

The specific action we are commanded to take here is to bring these worries to the Lord in prayer. But there is a particular kind of prayer that is commanded, prayer that is accompanied with thanksgiving. There is such a thing as anxious prayer, and we are commanded here to pray with

thanksgiving instead of anxiety. What does it mean exactly to pray with thanksgiving? What can we thank God for in the midst of our trials and worries? We can always thank God that he promises to turn all things to our benefit, no matter how severe the problem. We can thank God that he is sovereign over evil, turning evil to his purposes.

More than anything else, I think this passage has in mind giving thanks to God for answered prayer, even before we receive the answer. Spurgeon tells the story of George Muller, who was a contemporary of Spurgeon's and famous for his prayers for the salvation of unbelievers he knew.

“When I was conversing lately with our dear friend George Muller, he frequently astonished me with the way in which he mentioned that he had for so many months and years asked for such and such a mercy, and praised the Lord for it. He praised the Lord for it as though he had actually obtained it. Even in praying for the conversion of a person, as soon as he had begun to intercede he began also to praise God for the conversion of that person. Though I think he told us he had in one instance already prayed for thirty years and the work was not yet done, yet all the while he had gone on thanking God, because he knew the prayer would be answered. He believed that he had his petition, and commenced to magnify the Giver of it.

This is no name it and claim it approach to prayer, because it needs to be added that even though God will always answer prayer, he will sometimes answer it differently than we ask. God always answers prayer, either giving us what we ask for or something better. There was a couple in our community group who had moved to Birmingham from New Jersey. They were trying to sell their house there in order to purchase one here in Birmingham. We prayed for months for their house to sell, and it was making no sense that it didn't sell. It was a seller's market where houses were tough to find. Why was God not answering our prayers? And then we learned why. The husband's company moved his job in Birmingham back to New Jersey. God answered the real prayer behind the prayer, which was for his provision of a house.

When we take our anxieties to the Lord in prayer, with thanksgiving, God promises that his peace will replace our anxiety. **“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** God's peace is a surprising gift, beyond what might be expected for the person troubled with the trials and sufferings of life. But it is God's gift when we come to him with our worries.

III. God's Presence from All Things – v. 8-9

The world has always been unfriendly to Christian values, and it is tempting for us, in light of that fact, to reject everything in the world. Verse 8

commands a different path. It tells us to think about the things that are true and honorable. The idea here isn't that we are to search out all the things that are completely pure and think only about those things. If so, we would find precious little in this fallen world that would meet that high standard. Instead, what we are being told here is to look for and affirm whatever is honorable, just, pure and lovely in everything we encounter in life. This is a reversal of our natural tendency to see what's wrong and to be critical of that. Instead, we are commanded here to seek out what's right in every area of God's good creation. The brokenness of this world is undeniable, but it's original goodness can still be glimpsed. This world, including all the people in it, are like a stately old mansion that has fallen into disrepair. Even in its dilapidated condition, echoes of its previous glory can be seen. Paul says that we are to think about and ponder these things. They show us the glory of our great God, and they fan into flame our hope for the work that God is doing to restore the glory of his world.

Not only are we to ponder, but verse 9 tells us to practice something. The Christian is to think differently, but also to live differently. **“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things.”** It is often when we move out to put something into practice that we finally begin to understand correctly. So let me ask you now, “Is there some step God is calling you to take as a result of this text we are looking at today?” Perhaps the step is to begin seeing your worries as opportunities to draw near to God in prayer. Then do that. Perhaps the step is to repent of a critical spirit that fails to see the goodness of God in creation.

Paul ends verse 9 with a wonderful promise. **“And the God of peace will be with you.”** He has just promised in verse 7 that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds as we make our requests known to God in prayer. That's a great promise, but this one is even better. We won't just have the peace of God, but the God of peace. Not only the streams of peace, but the fountain source of all peace is promised.

CONCLUSION:

Dallas Willard wrote extensively in the area of spiritual formation. Gary Moon was with Willard when he died and describes it as follows:

In a voice clearer than [Gary] had heard in days, he leaned his head back slightly and with his eyes closed said, “Thank you.” Gary did not feel that Dallas was talking to him, but to another presence that Dallas seemed to sense in the room. And those were the last words of Dallas Willard. “Thank you,” he said to a very present and now finally visible to him God.

And those are the words most appropriate for us as well. We say “thank you” to a God who can change our greatest trials and our worries into joy and praise.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Philippians 4:4-9

1. Describe a happy time or happy experience in your life.
2. Is there a difference between happiness and joy? What would you say that difference is?
3. What do we learn from the word “always” in the command to “Rejoice in the Lord *always*”? Do you find it easier to obey this command during times of hardship or times of abundance and plenty? Can you think of examples?
4. The command against worry is equally comprehensive, telling us not to worry about *anything*. What are some little things you tend to worry about?
5. Prayer is the antidote to worry in this text, and the list of things we are to pray about is just as comprehensive as the things we are told not to worry about. What does it mean when we are told to pray with thanksgiving?
6. What can we be thankful for when we are battling specific worries? Does God promise to answer all our prayers?
7. Verse 8 is often misunderstood to mean that we should think only about those things that are completely honorable, pure, etc. The word “whatever” is important, because it changes the meaning by telling us instead that we are to find these honorable and pure qualities even in the midst of the brokenness of the world. Practice this with the following two current events. What honorable, pure, just, lovely and commendable things can you find: (1) in the Ukraine War, and (2) in the pandemic.
8. What benefit is there in finding the good in the midst of these bad things?