

Focused on the Positive – Philippians 4:1-9 – October 15, 2017

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The division in our country has been growing for quite some time, years, decades - but never has it been so blatantly obvious. Perhaps we can blame it on technology. At no time in history have we ever had access to so much information and opinion. When once our connections were limited by geography, daily print newspapers, phone lines and network television, 3-4 channels or whatever your antenna could pull in, now access to the world resides in the palm of our hands.

The divisions among us are deep. They reside within our families, our neighborhoods and communities, our schools, our governments. There is frustration, anger, and sometimes even hatred. And it is exhausting to be exposed to so much negativity. Are you tired? I am.

The first century Christians understood what it was like to live in troubling times. The early church faced more than its share of struggles. They had both external and internal conflict. They faced persecution by the Roman authorities – Paul was a perfect example of that as he wrote his letter from a Roman prison. And they experienced disagreements from within – Paul mentions a specific conflict between two leaders in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche. The early church was not immune from conflict, and because of this, it is not surprising that negative thoughts troubled them. And like us, the worse things got, the more they were likely to focus on the negatives.

Yet as Paul closes out his letter to them, he reminds the Philippian church of just how much they mean to him. His words are full of admiration and great affection. He encourages them to rejoice in the Lord. Joy is a theme that has run throughout this letter, and it is an important part of Paul's message to the church. When Paul refers to joy, or rejoicing, he is not talking about happiness. There is a difference between joy and happiness.

Being happy is a feeling based upon external circumstances. We can feel happy for any number of reasons – our team won the game, we're going on an exciting trip, or we found a twenty-dollar bill in the pocket of our fall jacket. Those things cause us to be happy. They are circumstantial, and our level of happiness is generally parallel to our circumstances. The better things are, the happier we are. When times are troubling, we find ourselves being less happy.

Joy is different. Having joy does not necessarily signal the absence of fear or pain. In fact joy and pain can coexist with one another. How is that possible? Joy is not tied to a feeling, like happiness, but is more of an inner state of being. One can be joyful in times of stress, because the joy that Paul is referring to has its basis in God. The joy doesn't come from us or from circumstance. When Paul talks about joy or rejoicing, it is always tied to God. He says rejoice in the Lord. Remember that you belong to God. And Paul writes in his letter that the Lord is near. This has a dual meaning. First, Paul was convinced that the return of Christ was imminent. He really expected Christ to come back at any moment, so he always lived in an attitude of anticipation.

Obviously, Paul was not correct in his assumption, but that doesn't mean that that is a wrong way to live. Consider the difference it would make in your own life if you thought that Jesus was coming back tomorrow or next week or next year. Would you be doing anything differently? Would your daily

life look different that it does now? Jesus often spoke to his disciples about living life in anticipation of God's Kingdom. Like Paul, Jesus also promoted this idea of living expectantly, living in a state of readiness for what is to come. Living like God is near.

But when Paul wrote that the Lord is near, he also meant it in the sense that God is with us. God is present, resides within us. This was said in the context of anxiety on behalf of the Philippians. Life was difficult for them, and so Paul reminds them that Christ supports them. That God's peace was available to them. In the midst of worry and despair, they need not fear, because they were not alone. They could speak to God through prayer and share with God their fears and anxieties, with the knowledge that God listened to their concerns and would uphold them in their times of trouble.

When Paul says here in this passage, do not worry, he is not saying that we should not be anxious at all, that we should toss our concerns aside like yesterday's garbage. The issues that faced the Philippian church, just like the issues that affect us, are very real with very serious consequences. And so how do we cope? How do we keep our sanity in the face of some very troubling issues? Rejoice in the Lord – yes, trouble may be knocking on the door, anxiety might be part of our daily concerns – but when we recognize that joy comes from God, it affects our attitude and our ability to cope with the stresses that face us in our lives. Instead of dwelling on the negative, focus on the positive. Instead of getting weighed down by the current worldly crises, rejoice in the Lord – focus on the positive.

This is not to be confused with the simplistic platitude – Don't worry, be happy. This isn't about the power of positive thinking. But it is about adopting an attitude of seeing the world through God's eyes. It is about becoming so grounded in God and drawing so close to God, that God's love naturally flows in us and through us. Paul himself embodied that attitude, evidenced by the fact that he could actually pen these words while facing an uncertain future in a Roman prison. Did he not have a few things to worry about? But instead of focusing on a negative situation that was out of his control, he focused on what was positive. He lived a life totally committed to Jesus Christ, and he believed that absolutely nothing could interfere with or change that.

Paul closes the letter by giving the Philippians some points to consider. He offers a list of virtues, and he instructs the church to reflect upon them. He really wants them to give these items some careful thought. Here is the list of they are to think about. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable. If there is anything excellent or worthy of praise, think on these things. Focus on what is positive. Focus on that which is virtuous. Don't dwell on the things that cause anxiety and worry.

Ponder those things that evoke in you a sense of wonder. What are the things that inspire us, encourage us, and fill us with the hope of something better? Let your imagination stretch out and find something that kindles within your soul a feeling of awe. For me I imagine a golden sunset over the Grand Canyon or a fine orchestra playing a symphony by Gustav Mahler. Again, this isn't about the power of positive thinking. It is much more than that. When we focus on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing or commendable we are not just filling our minds with positive images, but we

are filling our minds with those things that come from God. Everything that we can see or imagine that is excellent or worthy of praise has its basis in God.

When I spent two summers working at the Grand Canyon, there were times that I could look out over the vast expanse of this natural wonder and feel completely enveloped by God's immensity. The sense of the divine was almost overwhelming. Similarly, when I listen to a symphony by one of my favorite composers, like Mahler, I can get so wrapped up in the music that the beauty I experience is so intense it is almost unbelievable and can only be described as coming from God. When we focus on these types of things, that which is excellent or worthy of praise, we find ourselves being filled by God and in turn experiencing God's great power flowing through us and from us out into the world.

Sometimes it is difficult for us to not be caught up in the angst of the world around us. The division in our nation has many people very concerned. Futures are uncertain, and lives are at stake. The hardest hit by decisions made in haste or without concern for repercussions will undoubtedly be those who already have so little. The poorest people will be impacted the most. And in our own concern we should be careful not to forget those whose struggles are even greater than our own.

A fellow pastor from Texas once shared this story. She told of a conversation she had with a man who was homeless and was dying of cancer. The man had been homeless for dozen years or so, and recently had become a resident at a local charity in the community. He told the pastor that being able to live at this shelter had restored his hope in humanity. In her conversation with the man, the pastor learned that he loved opera, and so they began to talk about opera, and then the conversation gradually shifted to Shakespeare, art and literature.

Eventually the discussion turned to his impending death, and the man told the pastor that when he got to heaven, it would go like this. He imagined God coming up to him and asking him, "What did you like best?" The man said he would answer God, "Thank you for all the art!" The pastor was surprised. She was struck by the question that this man thought God would ask him. Not a question about – What do you have to say for yourself? Or, how well did you live your life on earth? No – instead, this man envisioned God inquiring, what did you like best? And more surprising still was the man's answer. No complaints about his lot in life, no despairing of his homeless status. No, he simply would say to God, "Thank you for all the art." (Illustration from RevGalBlogPals website) This is a man who understood how to think on things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Paul is not calling for an all-out change of direction in his letter to the Philippian church. They are already on the path, but he is simply pushing them a little further on, helping them to attain a greater maturity in their faith. As they are already unified in Christ and striving to achieve the goal of oneness in Christ, he urges them to continue to do the things they have witnessed in him. They have heard his lessons, received his teachings, observed his actions – he has been an ideal witness to them of what it means to be in full communion with Jesus Christ and with fellow believers.

Paul urges the Philippian church to emulate what they have witnessed him doing. He is the example for them to strive to follow. By imitating him, by being obedient to his teachings, by living with one another in harmony and unity, by pressing on toward the goal, and by focusing on those good and

positive things that come from God, they will be of the same mind as Jesus Christ and be able to work together to carry out God's mission in the world. May we follow their example.