

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 12: Final Exhortations in the Gospel - Philippians 4:1-9

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This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in a series on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 12, Final Exhortations in the Gospel, Philippians 4:1-9.

Welcome to session 12 in our study of Philippians.

This section is entitled Final Exhortations to Live Out the Gospel, and we will be covering chapter four, verses four through nine. Before we dive into that text, we will review and remind ourselves of where we were in the previous section. So in chapter 3, verse 15, through chapter 4, verse 3, Paul issued a call for the Philippians to imitate him and his co-workers, to model their lives after their own example of a Christ-like mindset.

And that section included not just that call to imitate, but a warning about these enemies of the cross of Christ that were a threat to the Philippians. And yet in contrast to them, Paul reminds believers that our citizenship is in heaven and we await a Savior from there. That section then concludes with an application of those truths and calling two women in the congregation of Philippi to reconcile, to solve their conflict, and encouraging others to get involved as necessary to make that happen.

And so the passage we're about to cover in this session is the opening paragraph of the final letter conclusion. So we've finished the letter body, and now we're transitioning to the conclusion of the letter. So before we read the text, I want to give just a brief snapshot of how this conclusion fits together.

And I've entitled this last section, Growth and Gratitude in the Gospel. And the passage that we will look at in this session is final exhortations in the gospel, which will then be followed by gratitude for gospel partnership, and then lastly, final greetings in the gospel. So let's go ahead now and turn our attention to final exhortations in the gospel.

And I will be reading from Philippians chapter 4, beginning in verse 4 and going through verse 9.

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

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. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

So Paul opens this section with yet another call to rejoice. You might recall that back in chapter 3, verse 1, he said, finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. You might have thought, oh, he's winding down.

And in fact, he still had two chapters to go. But he also said there, to write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. And so he's unapologetically coming back at the end of the letter and commanding the Philippians to rejoice.

Now what's important to notice here is that the object of our joy is the Lord himself. And so I think that helps us understand a little bit of the context or the meaning, really, of when Paul says rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice; it helps us see that the source of our joy is not our circumstances. And so, regardless of circumstances, and keeping in mind, of course, that Paul's circumstances are that he is under house arrest in Rome and awaiting a trial hearing to hear whether or not he will be acquitted or executed because of his proclamation of the gospel.

And yet he is saying that we as believers should rejoice in the Lord always. And because the Lord does not change, that is a fixed point, a stable anchor for our joy so that it's not moving and based on the shifting sands of our circumstances. So the object of our joy is the Lord.

The timing of our joy, Paul says, only when you feel like it. Wait, I'm sorry, I must have misread the verse. It says always, right? It says always that we are to rejoice in the Lord always, regardless of circumstances, regardless of what's going on, that we are to rejoice in the Lord always.

And again, here's where, if you contemplate Paul's circumstances, he is in a situation where his circumstances are not to his preference. And then lastly, we have to recognize that joy and sorrow or grief or other painful emotions or experiences are not mutually exclusive. That it's not like an on-off switch where you're either joyful or you're sorrowful, where you're joyful, or you're grieving.

And I think that that's a helpful reminder to us that joy can be a profound experience even in the midst of great sorrow. That we can rejoice in the Lord, who he is and what he's done for us, and yet be overwhelmed in some sense with grief and sorrow about certain circumstances, about the loss of a loved one or other scenarios that we might be facing. So this idea of rejoicing in the Lord always is not a flippant command that Paul gives from someone who is just living a life of comfort and ease.

And that gives it even more punch and power to it when Paul himself says, rejoice in the Lord always. Now in verse 5, what you see is Paul's going to move on to the next command. This whole section has the sort of rapid-fire feel of a series of commands.

And in verse 5, Paul writes, let your reasonableness be known to everyone. At least that's how the English Standard Version translates it. Other translations will translate it as something like gentleness.

And so the word itself has the sense of not insisting on every right of the letter of the law or custom. That's from a BDAG lexicon. And so some translations, as the ESV, have reasonableness, and if that's the case, the focus is on being level-headed, not being swayed by emotion, but being level-headed.

Other translations like the NIV and the New American Standard have gentleness or gentle spirits. So they would translate it as, let your gentleness be known to everyone. And if that's the case, it would refer to a disposition that seeks to diffuse conflict and bring restoration.

And I might suggest that that makes good sense here in the context, given that Paul has just urged two women in the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree in the Lord and urged other people in the congregation to come alongside and help them reach reconciliation. That seems to make good sense here. It's noteworthy that this same word is used in 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 3 as a requirement for elders.

And so it's something that Paul says should be shown to everyone. Not just the people who make it easy to be gentle with, but everyone. And notice again how often we saw this at the beginning of the letter, how often Paul is saying things like all and every and always.

He's trying to be comprehensive in these commands. And so it's grounded in the last part of verse 5, which also has an interpretive question surrounding it. The text says, the Lord is at hand, or the Lord is near.

And so there's debate. Is this a reference to a temporal reference? The return of the Lord is at hand. He's near.

It's going to happen very soon. And so you should be marked by gentleness. Or that same language could refer to a sort of spatial idea that the Lord is present with you.

He is with you. And therefore, you should be gentle or reasonable, maybe as the ESV has it. And honestly, both senses would be true.

And it may be that this is an example of intentional ambiguity. You know, sometimes when we do interpretation of text, we try to get so precise about, oh, it has to mean this or that. And we forget sometimes that in everyday speech, we can use intentionally ambiguous language to communicate more than one idea in a given moment.

So regardless, the idea here is that the Lord's nearness, that his presence among us, or the fact that he is about to return soon, should be a motivation for us to be marked by gentleness. And I think that's maybe a requirement of a character quality that we don't perhaps think enough about. Because we live in a time and an age where oftentimes we have this emphasis on maybe making bold statements and being dramatic about claims that we want to make or positions that we take.

And I think Paul wants us to be marked by certainly firm conviction and boldness where necessary, but that we can have a gentleness about us that helps to complement that boldness and that firm conviction. Okay, verse 6 now. We get to a text that maybe is one of the more familiar ones in the book of Philippians, where Paul writes, And so when you reflect on this text, you're probably reminded of what Jesus himself says in Matthew

chapter 6, where he talks about the cure or the antidote for anxiety, of not being anxious about what you're going to eat or what you're going to drink or what you're going to wear, but to instead, seek first the kingdom and his righteousness and that the Lord will provide for our means.

And so I think that it's certainly possible; I can't definitively say this, but it's certainly possible that Paul himself was aware of Jesus' specific teaching on this particular topic. But in any case, Paul says Do not be anxious about anything. And I think for many of us as Christians, this is one of the hardest commands to actually obey.

Right? That we can tend to be anxious about a lot of different things. And so notice Paul says the circumstances, right? In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And this actually is a comfort.

Because I think what this helps us to see is that there's nothing too small to bring to the Lord. That we might be tempted to think, well, it's really silly for me to be worked up about this, and God has much bigger issues to solve, like conflicts and wars and major nations and that sort of thing. And what's the little thing that I would even bother him with that is making me anxious?

But notice again, there's the pairing here, right? Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. It's the whole scope. It's the whole range of things.

And so what is the means by which we're to address our anxieties? It's prayer and supplication. So you might wonder why Paul is using those two terms? Is there a distinction there? And the distinction, if there really is one, is that the first term is a more general term, prayer. And then supplication is more specifically the asking for things from the Lord.

And so that's the means by which Paul directs us to fight against our anxious hearts. And then he goes on to give us the attitude, the perspective that we're to bring as we pray. And he says with thanksgiving, with thanksgiving, with gratitude.

And I think that that thanksgiving is rooted in the confidence that God will hear our prayers and that he is a faithful father to us and will answer them. Perhaps not in the way that we expect, perhaps not in the timing that we expect, but we approach God with gratitude and thanksgiving for who he is and what he has done for us, as well as our confidence that he will, in fact, answer our prayers. And I want to linger here for a minute on this because I think our inclination sometimes is when we're faced with anxious thoughts or things that cause us stress or concern that we go to many other avenues to try to fix that anxiety.

You know, we might try to simply just distract ourselves with something; we might talk to other people, and it's not that those things are inherently necessarily always bad, but I think sometimes in the Christian life we can have a tendency to treat prayer as a last resort rather than a first priority. That we try a lot of other things and then we kind of come to our wits' end and then we're like, well, I guess I should pray about this, as if prayer is sort of like the last resort that we have in facing these things. And what Paul seems to say here is prayer should be the first priority.

That that's the starting point when you find those anxious thoughts, that anxiety taking root in our hearts and our minds, that our initial response should be prayer, letting our requests be made known to God. So that's Paul's antidote for anxiety, and I just want to pause to acknowledge that Paul is not coming; Paul should not be understood in this sort of simplistic way, as if, oh, you're anxious? If you just pray a little bit, that anxiety will just completely disappear. And never come back.

I think we all know from experience that's just not the case. And so what this often requires is repeatedly coming back to the Lord, as we feel those anxious thoughts and feelings coming into our hearts and minds, that we need to continually come back to him. And we need to probably be realistic that this is an ongoing experience for many of us.

That it's not just a simple band-aid fix, that we will often have to continually come back to the Lord over things that cause us anxiety. So Paul's not simplistic here, but he is addressing a key human experience. And we, I think, increasingly live in an anxious and more anxious age.

And so I think this is something that we should take to heart when it comes to addressing that. Now if you look at verse 7, Paul's going to give us the result of prayer. Verse 7, he says, The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

And so I think we need to consider carefully what Paul means by the peace of God. What is it? Well, as we saw back in chapter 1, at the beginning of the letter, when Paul used that word in his greetings, I would say it's a one-word shortening for the resulting state of God's eschatological salvation. So it includes the ideas of wholeness and completeness. Now you might think, well, wait a minute.

How does that fit here? We experience God's peace in the present as we await its full realization on the last day. And so I think it's important to note here that first and foremost, when Paul talks about the peace of God, he is not primarily talking about this sort of subjective sense of lack of anxiety or lack of uncertainty or just a lack of being uncomfortable. It's not the same thing as just, oh, I just feel this calm, like this calm.

I don't think that's what Paul has directly in mind here. It's that the reality of God's reconciling work of making us part of his family, that that reality gives us confidence to continue to move forward even in the face of emotional uncertainty or turmoil. So that's what it is.

Where does it come from? God. It says the peace of God, and for those who know Greek as a gender construction, and so of course those can be understood in a variety of different ways, but I think the idea here is that the source of peace is God himself, that he is the giver of that. What is it like? Paul says that it surpasses all understanding, that it goes beyond just an intellectual grasp of a reality, but that it does have an effect over the totality of us, that it goes beyond just an intellectual agreement of, okay, I have this intellectual concept in my head of God's peace.

And what does it do? It guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. That the peace of God acts as a watchman, as a guard to protect our hearts and minds, and don't move too quickly past that last phrase, in Christ Jesus. That's again one of Paul's favorite expressions.

That's the context, the sphere in which we live, and that is also the context and sphere in which our hearts and minds dwell as well. And so the peace of God guards us; it protects us in Christ Jesus. I want to say just a brief word about when we sometimes see this verse applied; I want to issue a caution here.

Sometimes you will hear when people are faced with a decision or praying through or wrestling with something, they might say something like, well, I just don't have a peace about it, or I'm waiting for God to give me peace before I do x, y, or z. And I'm not saying that I'm totally discounting that altogether, but I will say that it seems to me that the Bible never lays that out as part of a decision-making process. The Bible doesn't suggest, well, don't do anything until you have this peace or this sense of calm or this sense of just relaxed, calm certainty. There are a lot of decisions that we have to make in life where we're not going to have a peace about it, and we're simply making the best decision that we can based on God's Word, God's wisdom that has given us counsel for other people, and we still might have very you know, you know, tossing and turning stomachs and anxious feelings and thoughts as we step forward to do what we believe God has called us to do.

And so I want to be careful about using that criteria as well. I can't move forward until I have this subjective sense of calm about a decision that I have to make. I think that God's peace works a little bit differently than that, and so sometimes you might choose to give that, where you know, you're wrestling with the decision, and you think, okay, I think this is the way the Lord would have me go.

And that act of making that decision does bring a sense of calmness and confidence and comfort, but that's not always the case. There are times where I know what God wants me to do, and I still don't have peace about it. I have inner turmoil about it, because it might be a hard situation that I'm stepping into, or it might be something that is going to make me uncomfortable by following what the Lord has.

So just be careful about how we think about this idea of the peace of God. Then in verse 8, Paul uses another finally, and you're thinking, is he actually going to get to the end of the letter here? Another finally. He says, 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.

So what Paul is stressing here is the need to direct our thoughts. And so he gives this list, this rapid-fire list of true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise, and the idea here is that Paul is saying, these are the kinds of things that you should reflect on, think about, direct your mind towards. Sometimes we view ourselves, I think, as just sort of helpless recipients of thoughts that pop into our head.

We really can't do anything about what our thoughts are. And while certainly thoughts can come into our minds unprovoked, and that is something that is real, Paul says, look, you can

direct your thoughts in certain ways. So at the end of verse 8 there, he says, think about these things, consider them, reflect upon them, contemplate them.

And so I think that this list, it's not intended to be exhaustive, but it's intended to give a representative sample of the kinds of things we should be fixing our thoughts on. And so as we think about this, I also want to stress that Paul doesn't mean that these things that come to mind have to be directly or inherently spiritual. He's not saying, oh, when you think of something that's true, it has to be something that's spiritual, as we tend to think about it, or even lovely.

I think Paul here has a broad sense of, it's fine, it's good for us to direct our thoughts to things that are lovely, like things in nature, the beauty of God's creation. Or even if we think of things that are excellent, they don't have to be explicitly spiritual things. They could be things that we see in God's creation that impress us, that are noteworthy, and even commendable.

So we need to be careful about not thinking, oh, we have to be so super spiritual here, that everything that falls under this category has to be explicitly spiritual or biblical. I think Paul is allowing for a broad range of directing your mind towards these kinds of things. And I think that as we reflect on how sin tends to gain a foothold into our hearts and our minds and our lives, it is regularly through our thought bodies, that as thoughts come into our mind, if we are not careful to battle them, to, as Paul says elsewhere, to take every thought captive, that we are in danger of allowing those thoughts to take root and to bear the poisonous fruit of sin and disaster in our lives.

So that's the mindset that Paul is giving us here. Even though he doesn't use that term mindset that we've seen all throughout Philippians, this is a snapshot of what he has in mind here as well. Then lastly, here in verse 9, we have the call to application.

He concludes with, What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. So that combination of learned and received has more of the sense of formal instruction. This is what they have heard Paul preach and teach, and also that term of received is often used in the context of passing along tradition.

So this is more of a formal, I think, idea of what you have learned and received through my teaching and preaching ministry. And then he adds what you have heard and seen. Now he's focusing on, what have you observed in me? And this goes back, of course, to what he said earlier about presenting himself and others as examples of a Christ-like mindset.

And so he's drawing those threads together and saying, look, reflect on the things that you have observed in my life. And then there's the command. Practice these things.

Practice them. In other words, intentionally put them into action. The idea of practice communicates the repetition of these things.

This is not a, we'll do them once. It's over and over again. Put them into action, and then there's the promise at the end.

The God of peace will be with you. So you notice how he's kind of turned that phrase there, right? Earlier he talked about the peace of God as something that will guard our hearts and minds. And now he's saying the God of peace will be with you.

So God is the one who not just gives peace, but he is the one who established peace with us through his Son, Jesus Christ. So there's a rapid-fire series of commands, final exhortations, that Paul is giving as he wraps up the letter. Let's step back from that sort of rapid-fire sequence and ask, what's the big idea of the passage? And I'm going to frame it in the context of a question.

I think we can summarize it as, how can I apply the gospel on a daily basis? And I think Paul is going to show us three ways in this passage how we can apply the gospel. The first is to focus on the Lord. Rather than focusing on ourselves, focus on the Lord.

Second, pray about everything. Prayer is not just something that we do maybe in the morning when we get up or in the evening when we're ready for bed or just when we're about to have a meal. Prayer should be an ongoing dialogue, a conversation with the Lord.

And then lastly, follow the right examples. So focus on the Lord, pray about everything, and follow the right examples. Let's think a little bit about application now as we come to the end of this passage using our four areas.

Let's start with: what does God want us to think? The area I chose to focus on- there are many here- is that we must direct our thought life. That we must be intentional about setting our minds on things rather than just allowing thoughts to freely float into our mind, unchallenged and unevaluated. Second, believe.

God wants to hear all of our prayer requests. He longs for us; He delights in us opening up and sharing our requests with Him. It's not as if He doesn't know them already.

God is omniscient; He knows all things. And so it's not in the sense of, well, God won't know if you don't tell Him. He already knows; He already knows better than we do what we need.

But this is an opportunity for us to relate to and connect with the God of the universe, and He wants to hear our requests. Third, desire or feel. I think we should desire or feel the security and the stability that comes from the peace of God.

In our culture, we tend to be an anxious people, and we're constantly bombarded with messages about the latest crisis or the latest thing that's supposed to cause us concern. And one of the ways that we as Christians can stand out is by being marked by the peace of God, by not being reactionary and just constantly thinking, "Oh, the sky is falling, the world's coming to an end, this is all just going to collapse. Of course, we should be aware of what's going on in our world, but even as we experience that, being marked by the stability and the security that comes from the peace of God.

And then lastly, do. This is an exercise that I've done myself, and I think this can be helpful. For that list in Philippians 4.8, identify one specific thing for each quality that comes to mind.

So when you hear the word true, what comes to mind? Or honorable? Or lovely? Or anything that's excellent or worthy of praise? Think about at least one thing that you can direct your mind as an intentional way of putting this into practice. So those were the final exhortations in the gospel. In our next and final session in Philippians, we are going to see how Paul concludes the letter by expressing his gratitude for the Philippians' gift and sends some final greetings to the church in Philippi.

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