

Phil 4:1-9
Rejoicing in Christ
Tim Anderson 30/7/17

Rejoice in the Lord always.
I will say it again, rejoice!
Rejoicing has been a bit of a theme of this letter.
Back in chapter 1, Paul spoke of his own rejoicing.
He rejoices whenever Christ is preached.
Whether those preaching did it from false motives or true.
He will continue to rejoice,
because things that have happened to him
will turn out for his deliverance.
Whether that means his release from prison
or being delivered into the arms of Jesus through death,
it doesn't matter.
Paul rejoices either way.
To live is Christ.
To die is gain.
Back in chapter 3,
Paul doesn't want the Philippians to get tied up in knots
about religious performance.
Whether they are getting self righteous
because they are doing a good job
or depressed because they are doing a bad job,
focusing on their performance is not going to help.
He wants them to rejoice in the Lord.
Rejoice in Jesus and what he's done for you.
It's the only way to keep your head in the right space.
And here in chapter 4, he says it again.
Rejoice in the Lord always.
I will say it again, rejoice!

Now like most things you could take this the wrong way.
Here's a couple of songs from my childhood.
"I am h-a-p-p-y.

I am h-a-p-p-y.
I know I am.
I'm sure I am.
I'm h-a-p-p-y.

I'm inright , outright,
upright, downright
Happy all the time.
I'm inright , outright,
upright, downright
Happy all the time.

Now granted these are kids songs,
and probably it is unrealistic to expect kids
to get the nuances between being happy and rejoicing.
But let me say it as clearly as I can.
Paul is not saying that Christians need to be happy all the time.
Rejoice always - Yes.
Happy all the time - No.

We don't want the church
to become like the venue for a marketing conference.
"How are you going today, mate?"
"Fantastic. Really, really good. Never been better.
How are you?"
"Just super. I feel like Neil Armstrong walking on the moon."
Marketing people exude what they call positivity.
But I have a suspicion it's fake.
Someone told them you have to sound successful to be successful.
So they talk about how great they feel
irrespective of how they actually feel.
Have you read the play death of a salesman?
Faking happiness -
That ain't rejoicing in the Lord always.

So what is rejoicing in the Lord?

Well the key is 'in the Lord'.

If you are trying to be happy about your circumstances in life,
well sometimes there are going to be difficulties.

And if you think Christians have to be happy about the difficulties,
then either you will fake it to fit in with your Christian friends.

Which can give rise to superficial relationships
between Christian brothers and sisters,
or you will give up trying to be a Christian,
deciding that you haven't got what it takes
to be like all these smiling people around you.

We need to rejoice in the Lord.

Rejoice that God's great power has torn us out of Satan's grip
and brought us into the kingdom of his Son.

Rejoice that God's immeasurable patience bears with us
when we got it wrong for the hundredth time.

Rejoice that God's wisdom draws the threads of our lives together,
so that when we look back on we see
that he's been working together all things for our good.

Rejoice in the love of God shown to us on the cross.

Greater love has no man than that he give up his life for his friends.
Jesus did that for you, so rejoice!

Rejoicing in the Lord is rejoicing
in things that can't be taken away from you.

It's rejoicing that is built on solid foundations.

It's rejoicing that you can do even when you are feeling awful.

In fact it's more important when you are feeling awful,
because it puts the awful into perspective.

So let's rejoice in the Lord always.

Paul's next encouragement to us,
is to let our gentleness be evident to all.

What is gentleness?

It depends a bit on who you are.

If you are a ruler,
then gentleness is to mix mercy with justice
in the administration of the law.

There are always people who fall foul of the letter of law but who if they are offered mercy will get their lives back on track. Knowing how to be gentle in the administration of justice so as to both uphold the law and get the best out of people - that is real wisdom.

But gentleness can also be practiced by the powerless.

When a powerless person is patient and steadfast when facing injustice, when they undergo trial without malice towards those oppressing them. When they trust God to bring justice into the situation and don't need to take justice into their own hands.

That is gentleness too.

Where ever you are in life,
you can practice gentleness.

How is gentleness connected to rejoicing in the Lord?

Rejoicing in the Lord gives the strength to be gentle.

Sometimes when you are gentle towards other people,
it can feel like they are being given an opportunity to walk over you.

But if you are rejoicing in the Lord,
then you can say,

"That's OK if they walk over me.

I don't have to demand my rights,
because no one can take away from me,
the wonderful things that Jesus has done for me."

Paul underlines this by saying,

"The Lord is near."

You can be gentle.

Why? The Lord is returning soon.

And he will sort out any problems of justice then.

So right now we can afford to be gentle.

The next thing the apostle tells us is to stop worrying.

Don't be anxious about anything.

You might say,

"Paul didn't live in the 21st century.

He didn't know how much there is to be anxious about."

And it's true he didn't live this century.
He didn't have bad news from all over the world
being transmitted onto his ipad.
He didn't have kids at school bullying one another
at all hours of the night via instant messaging apps.
Even back when I was at school,
the bullying stopped at the school gate.
Paul didn't have global warming
threatening catastrophic rising in sea level
wiping out communities like Hastings.
He didn't have terrorists driving cars on the foot path.
He didn't have drugs destroying lives in the community.
But y'know he was sitting on death row while he was writing this letter.
He had been shipwrecked three times.
He'd been stoned until his attackers thought he was dead.
He wasn't naive about things that cause anxiety.
But he doesn't need to worry
because the Lord is near.
And that hasn't changed.
The Lord is near to those who call on him now,
just as he was near to those who called on him in the first century.
So stop worrying.
Remember God knows your situation.
He has looked after you so far.
And whatever happens in your life,
he's going to keep you safe in his arms for eternity.
You have nothing to worry about.

So what should we do about those situations that make us lose sleep?
The answer is simple.
Pray.
Do not be anxious about anything.
But in every situation,
by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving,
present your requests to God.

I've been presenting some requests to God recently.
I've been asking him to bring some playgroup families
along to the playgroup thanksgiving Sunday next week.
Will he bring some?
I don't know.
But I'm not worrying about it.
I'm praying about it.
Perhaps you could pray about that too.

And it says when we pray,
we should do it with thanksgiving.
Now sometimes people have taken this the wrong way.
They say you should thank God for what you're asking for in advance,
as a way of demonstrating that you have faith.
Like this,
"Dear Lord,
please bring some families from our playgroups
along to the Thanksgiving service.
And we are praying in faith Lord.
We thank you in advance for bringing them along.
We know that you are building up your kingdom Lord.
So thank you for bringing those families in."
I'm not suggesting we pray like that.
It seems presumptuous
to assume we know how God will answer our prayers.
He's God and we are not after all.
Instead we can present requests
with thanksgiving for the ways that God has blessed us in the past.
That gives our hearts reassurance about God's character
and stirs up our faith.
So we might pray like this.
"Dear Lord,
please bring some families from playgroup
along to the Thanksgiving service next week.
And thank you for the service of Tammi and Heather
and the other helpers.

Thank you for the witness they are to the love of the Lord Jesus.
I pray that you would use that witness
and grow it in the hearts of the carers and the children.
Thank you that you have used playgroups
to bring people to faith in the past.
I thank you for Narelle, the treasurer of our Healesville church,
who came along to the church through playgroup.
I'm confident Lord that you have the power to do that miracle again."
That's presenting your requests with thanksgiving.
It results in prayers that are more than just a shopping list,
but they reflect on the character of God.

What will happen if you pray like that?
"The peace of God which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."
All kinds of things can be going totally haywire.
But if you give those problems over to God,
then he promises that his peace will guard your heart and mind.
Tim Keller tells a story of a lady in his church.
Her toddler fell out of a chair.
Over balanced.
She took the child for an X-ray
and the paediatrician reported a case of suspected child abuse.
The lady and her husband had 9 months
where they could only see their three children
on supervised access visits.
And yet in the midst of it,
when she cried out to God in prayer,
she reported feeling a sense of overwhelming peace.
Long before she got her kids back
and was completely exonerated in the courts,
her heart was captured by the peace of God.

What this passage is trying to encourage us to do
is live a life of rejoicing instead of anxiety.
Rejoice in the Lord always.

One cure for anxiety is to give over your problems to the Lord in prayer.
Another cure for anxiety is to think about wholesome things
and don't fill your mind with rubbish.

Paul says,

"Whatever is true,
whatever is noble,
whatever is right,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is admirable,
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy,
think about such things."

It shouldn't surprise us
that what goes into our minds affects the kind of people we become.
It doesn't surprise you when you read
that some person who went on a violent rampage
had watched lots of violent movies.
So why do we think it will be any different with us?
If we put good things into our minds,
then that will affect what we dwell on.
That will affect what we talk about,
what we want to do with our time.
And it affects the kind of people we become.

Recently scientists have discovered that the brain is quite plastic.
That means it rewires itself depending on what stimulus it gets.
You can actually change the physical structure of your brain
depending on what you think about.
That's good news and bad news.
The bad news is that if you think about evil,
your brain will develop connections that reinforce such thinking.
The good news is that if you stop doing that kind of thinking,
it only takes about a month for some of the connections to get broken.
Your brain can rewire itself to reinforce more positive thinking habits.

I think there's a bit of a fear that if we spend our time

thinking about noble, pure and admirable things,
We'll miss out on the fun stuff,
and we won't have anyone to hang out with.
That's lies from the devil.
Evil only seems fun when you are tempted.
Once you engage in thinking about it.
It's enslaving and it causes misery.
Think about Scrooge from 'A Christmas Carol'.
Spent all his time thinking about money.
And ended up with an empty life.

We need to have confidence that the instruction that God gives
will actually enrich our lives.
He made us.
He knows what makes us tick.
He doesn't give us instruction
because he enjoys seeing us miss out on fun.
He loves us and wants to see us flourish.

So let's summarise.
Rejoice in the Lord!
When you rejoice in everything God has done for you,
you are rejoicing in what can't be taken away.
It gives your life stability in every circumstance.
Gentleness is a great virtue.
It's possible to be gentle if you are rejoicing in the Lord.
And if you remember that the Lord is near,
he will sort out injustice.
So you can afford to be gentle.
Don't worry about stuff.
Instead pray with thanksgiving.
If you do that, God's peace will fill your heart.
And think about good stuff,
because that will shape your life in a good way.
Trust God, it will be a blessing for you.