

The Art of Living

Philippians 4:2-9
David H. Roper

Let's pick up our study where we left it last week, by reading Philippians 4, verses 2 through 9;

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. Indeed, true comrade, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.

These words of admonition in this closing chapter of Philippians are familiar, I am sure, to many of you. Paul begins with a word of entreaty to two ladies in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, who evidently are having a difficult time getting along. We don't know anything about these ladies other than what Paul tells us here. Their names mean "fragrant" and "affable," misnomers in the situation in Philippi. Someone has renamed them "Odious" and "Soon-touchy." Perhaps these names are more appropriate. But Paul anticipates a problem that could split the church. Perhaps groups are beginning to form around these two ladies, and so he writes to encourage them to make up and to live in harmony with one another.

We need to remember that when these words first reached the church at Philippi they were read aloud in front of the entire congregation. They didn't have individual copies of the letter as we do. Paul sent a scroll, or perhaps pieces of papyrus, and one of the elders of the church read it aloud. I am sure that this was a bit embarrassing. Great silence must have followed the reading of this passage, and perhaps people looked out of the corners of their eyes to Euodia and Syntyche, seated at opposite ends of the auditorium, and watched them turn crimson! Paul's approach to problems like this was head-on. He sensed that there was a problem here which could be very destructive in the church, and so he wants to meet it at its incipient stages.

The more I read this book the more certain I become that the primary purpose for its writing was to solve the problem between Euodia and Syntyche. Almost everything that Paul has to say, apart from his word of thanksgiving for the gift they had sent and a few other miscellaneous exhortations, has to do with this potential split in the body. You will notice that in chapter 4, verse 1, Paul concludes his argument with this command:

Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so *stand firm* in the Lord, my beloved.

If those words "stand firm" sound familiar it is because they are a repetition of what Paul says in chapter 1 when he turns to speak of the conduct of the church in Philippi. You remember that he introduces the book with a word of greeting and then a word regarding his memories of the church at Philippi and then tells them something of his circumstances in prison. Then he turns to their conduct in verse 27:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are *standing firm* in one Spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . .

Paul's concern is that the church in Philippi present a united front to the world. They ought to stand fast, in one mind. So from this point on, he begins to lay out some of the principles which will make possible that united stand. In chapter 2, verse 3 there is a statement of perhaps the most important truth which will make that unity possible:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

He says, in essence, "Don't be preoccupied with your own concerns, but be preoccupied with the interests of others. That is what will make possible a spirit of unity and communion in the church." Then he cites as an illustration the life of Jesus Christ himself, who gave up his rights as God and came to earth in order to be a servant. He follows with an illustration from his own life - his willingness, as he says in verse 17, to be "poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith." Then he alludes to the example of Timothy and finally to that of Epaphroditus, who was willing to give up his life for the sake of the apostle Paul.

In chapter 3 he lays down another, more basic, principle - one which underlies the idea of giving up our rights and our interests for those of others. Here he deals with the principle of the cross, this great truth that we have died with Christ, and that therefore our life is no longer ours. But we have available to us the life of Jesus Christ, and we serve in the power of that life. That is the principle of the cross - that life comes out of death.

So then in chapter 4, verse 1, he says, "Therefore, stand firm." And I believe that all of these great truths, all of these mighty facts in these opening chapters, including the great christological section in chapter 2, were for the benefit of Euodia and Syntyche. It is as though Paul has taken a massive pyramid of truth and has turned it on its apex, so that all the weight of that pyramid is brought to bear upon this one issue. His point seems to be, "Euodia and Syntyche, there is absolutely no reason why you should live in disharmony." Given the facts presented to us in the book of Philippians, there is no reason why any of us should live in disharmony with one another. We have everything that we need in order to live in love, compassion, and unity.

You see, this is what the Christian message is all about! The truth in the word of God is intended to be brought to bear upon these very practical areas of life - how we live with one another in our homes, how we live in our office, and on our street, and with one another here in the body of Christ. That is where the truth is to be applied.

In Colossians, chapter 1, Paul prays for the church in Colossi. One aspect of that prayer is that they might realize all the power that they have in the Godhead - power which is available to them. And Paul says that all of that power is given to you in order to give you "endurance and patience with joy." All of that power is not given to you to do mighty works of epic proportions, to produce great, world-shaking events, but, rather, to enable you to endure and to give you patience - to give you endurance and patience *with joy*. That is the purpose of the truth of God. It is to be applied right in these very practical areas of life - such as the illustration given to us here of Euodia and Syntyche.

Are you reading your Bible that way? Are you using the truth that way in your life? That is the way it ought to be used. We ought to study the Word not just in order to know it, but so that it might be the means to the end of our being, in every relationship, what God intends us to be.

It is interesting to me, in the case of Euodia and Syntyche, that Paul does not take sides. He doesn't say, "Now, Euodia, the problem is your own stubbornness and your unwillingness to give up your rights. Actually Syntyche is in the right. So you should make up." No, he doesn't use that approach at all, because it doesn't really matter who is right and who is wrong. We don't have to demonstrate the rightness of our

position, or the error in another's position, in order to live in harmony with them. We have in Jesus Christ all that we need in order to set aside our own rights and to be loving and forgiving, and giving, in any situation. They don't have to understand. We just have to be understanding. We don't have to demonstrate to others that we are right. We just have to be righteous in the situation. Everything we need in order to live in harmony is available to us. So Paul can simply entreat Euodia and Syntyche to live in harmony with one another.

Notice that in verse 3 Paul calls for the rest of the body to assist these women. He refers to an individual who is identified here as his "true comrade," or "yokefellow" in other translations, and to another person by the name of Clement. We know who Clement was. He was a first-century church father, a very important person in the church after the death of the apostles, whose writings we have today.

But we don't know who this "yokefellow" was. It could be that this is a proper name - Suzuge - some individual living in Philippi who could assist these two women. Some have suggested that this might have been the apostle Paul's wife. This particular term is used from time to time to refer to one's marriage partner, although it doesn't seem likely that at this time the Apostle had a wife. Scripture suggests otherwise. Paul probably was married at one time in his life. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, and men had to be married to sit on that particular council. I think that perhaps his wife left him when he acknowledged Jesus as Messiah. That may be one of the things Paul is referring to in this very book when he says that he has suffered the loss of all things in order that he might gain Christ. He may have lost his wife and his family, among all the other things which had been so precious to him. But it doesn't seem that at this point he could have had a wife.

Others have suggested, and this makes sense to me, that he is referring to Timothy, who was his scribe. He was seated alongside the Apostle as he dictated these words, and Timothy wrote them down. Perhaps Paul turned to Timothy and said, "Yokefellow, I encourage you, when you go back to Philippi, to assist these women," and Timothy wrote it right into the text for our benefit.

But in any case Paul recognizes that these women in Philippi need help. There are some sins which are so deeply entrenched in our lives, some problems which are so great, that we need help from the rest of the body in order to lay hold of the resources of Christ that we have. We may be so blinded, so immobilized by our own fleshly actions, so much a prisoner of the flesh, that we need help from one another. It is to this that Paul refers: "Help these women."

The term which Paul uses here, translated "help," doesn't mean "assist," as we employ it today. There is another term used in the New Testament which indicates that sort of help, i.e., the meeting of the needs that another person would have. This term means "take them along with you." The idea is that they are to take the two women to the same source of strength which they have. "Your strength is in the Lord. Now take them to the Lord to find help." You see, Paul recognizes that, though the body can be useful in assisting people to straighten out their problems, we cannot really help people in the sense that *we* meet their needs. Only the Lord can meet their needs. The function of the body is to take people to the Lord, who alone meets their needs.

In Hebrews 4 the author of that book writes that we have a high priest who can be touched by the feelings of our infirmities. "Therefore," he says, "let us go boldly to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy [Mercy is for the helpless.] and find grace [Grace is for those who don't deserve help - the worthless.] to help in time of need." He says that when you feel helpless or worthless, go to the throne of grace. There you will receive mercy and find grace to *help* in time of need. And that is the New Testament term which means "help" in the sense of meeting someone's need. It is used throughout Scripture for the kind of help which God gives. Normally he is the subject of the action - with one notable exception. In the book of Acts, chapter 27, when the apostle Paul is on a ship which is beginning to break up, we read that the sailors attached ropes under the ship to help hold it together. That is the same term as is used in Hebrews 4. It conveys the idea of holding something together which is threatening to break apart. That is the kind of help which God, and only God, can provide. Our function as members of the body of Christ is not to provide *that* kind of help, because we can't, but to take people to the Lord who alone can hold people together.

That is what counseling is. As someone said, "Good counseling is one beggar telling another beggar where

to find bread." All we can do is to take people to the Lord who can satisfy their needs. But that means that any member of the body of Christ can be engaged in this kind of action! This doesn't require professional training. It seems to me that ninety to ninety-five percent of the counseling problems I encounter could be solved by any other brothers or sisters in Christ who would take the troubled persons to the Lord and to his word, and would help them get their eyes off their circumstances, off the difficult situations they are in, off their feelings of helplessness and weakness, and get their eyes on the Lord and on the promises in his word. This is something that all of the body can be engaged in. Perhaps you can do nothing more than to pray with those having problems and to encourage them to express their dependence upon the Lord. But that is taking them to the One who can help. Paul recognizes that erring members of the body need that kind of assistance. We as members of that body can take others to the place of help. And so he entreats the members of the body there in Philippi, and perhaps Timothy, to engage themselves in that ministry.

From this point on in the chapter, Paul gathers together a number of miscellaneous commands. It doesn't appear to me that these have any logical connection. It is Paul's habit when he comes to the end of a book to gather a number of loose ends - perhaps the book of 1 Thessalonians is the clearest illustration of this - a series of imperatives, things which are on his mind, which are not particularly related to his argument but nevertheless are issues which concern him. Verses 4 through 9 contain some of these commands. Verse 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!

This is a recurring theme in the book of Philippians - rejoice in the Lord! Paul is not saying, "Be joyful." Joy is an emotion. Our emotions are not at our beck and call. We cannot command them. He is not saying, "Just try to be joyful. Try to adopt a cheerful attitude." He is saying, rather, "Rejoice *in the Lord*. Let the Lord be your source of joy. Fasten your roots down deeply Into him. Let him be your source of confidence. Let him be your life. Let him be what you rejoice in." The reason so many Christians are not finding the Christian life to be what they expected it to be, is that they are not rejoicing in Christ only. They are rejoicing in him and trying to rejoice in something else as well. It is only when we rejoice In the Lord and in him alone that we truly have joy. So Paul's point here is, "Rejoice always, regardless of the circumstances. No matter what the pressures may be, no matter what other resource may seem to be the help that you need, rejoice in him alone."

There is a third command in verse 5. Paul writes,

Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

The term which is translated "forbearing" here is a word which is difficult to translate into English. We don't have an exact English counterpart. It conveys the idea of a non defensive attitude. It pictures the person who doesn't assert his own rights, who doesn't insist on his own way, who doesn't try to defend himself. It is translated in other places In Scripture as gentleness. But that is still not quite the meaning of the word. It is a person who forgoes his own rights, who will not insist on pushing through his own program in his own way and according to his own time schedule.

That forbearance is possible, Paul points out, because the Lord is near. These two terms are related: "Let your forbearance be known to all men. The Lord is at hand." He may be referring here to the imminency of the coming of Christ. But I think that he is referring to the fact that the Lord is present now. He is here. He is at hand. He is our defense. He is the one who takes care of us. He is the one who provides for our needs. He fights our battles for us so that we don't need to fight them. We don't need to defend ourselves. We don't need to assert ourselves, do our own thing, insist on our own way. The Lord will fight for us.

When I think of forbearing men, two illustrations come to mind from the Old Testament. The first is Abraham. Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldees in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, an area where the people were idol worshipers with little knowledge of the true God. He was called by God over into the land of Canaan. When he arrived there the Lord gave him the promise of the entire land. It was all to be his. The dimensions of the land are described for us in the book of Genesis - from beyond Mt. Hermon in the north all the way south to the land of Egypt, from the Mediterranean Sea east to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. God gave him the title deed - the promise which was conditioned on the faithfulness of God.

AS the story unfolds you come to the episode when Lot's herdsmen came in conflict with Abraham's herdsmen as their flocks began to multiply. Lot, though he was Abraham's nephew, was a source of strife in the family. So Abraham confronted Lot with the situation. Now, Abraham could have insisted that Lot give him the land, that Lot move his flocks someplace else, because the land was Abraham's. But he didn't do it. He let Lot choose. Lot chose the Valley of Sidon, the area around Sodom and Gomorrah. And the rest of his life is a story of steady decline in the quality of that life. At the very end you find him living in a cave outside the region of Sodom and Gomorrah. He had lost his wealth. He had, for all practical purposes, lost his family - his daughters were hopelessly corrupted by their life in Sodom. He had nothing to show for his choice.

On the other hand Abraham, who let God choose for him, had the whole land. God took him up on a mountain and said, "Abraham, look to the north and the south and the east and the west as far as your eye can see - that is your land." God multiplied his flocks and his family and gave him thousands upon thousands of descendants, because Abraham let God make the choice for him. He let God fight his battles.

I think also of Moses. Moses is described in the Old Testament as the meekest man whoever lived, i.e., he did not insist on his own rights, he didn't defend himself. Whenever conflict would develop in the nation of Israel, whenever he was opposed in his leadership, Moses would go to a little tent he kept off to the side, and he would get on his knees and say, "Lord, what shall I do?" And the Lord would fight his battles for him. Moses never had to defend himself. He never had to insist that he was the leader. He let God fight his battles.

That is forbearance. Paul says, "Let your forbearance be known to all men because the Lord is at hand. The Lord will fight your battles." We don't have to defend ourselves. We may have to defend the rights of others, and we may have to stand up for a principle which is at stake, but where our own rights are all that is at stake we don't need to defend ourselves. God will fight for us. He is at hand.

Then there is a fourth command, verse 6:

Be anxious for nothing, 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 comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Do you want to have your emotions and your mind guarded by the peace of God, that strange, inexplicable peace of God? Do you want to be free from anxiety? Paul says that the antidote to anxiety is prayer. Now, he is not saying that Christians don't have times of anxiety, nor that there are not times when we are frightened. But the verb is in the present tense. We should not continue on in an anxious state. We don't have to, because we have available to us the resource of prayer. Paul says, "When we sense our weakness, when we begin to get fearful - pray! Pray about everything. Don't be anxious about anything. Pray about everything. Nothing is too trivial for God. Nothing is too insignificant, too infinitesimal. God is concerned about everything. He is concerned about every detail of your life. So when there is anxiety over any issue," Paul says, "pray. And there will come a sense of peace, of assurance that God is in control of that area of your life."

When I was in seminary one of my professors, Howard Hendricks, told the story of an incident which took place in his home. A visiting dignitary had come to the seminary. Evidently he was a very pompous sort of individual. Mr. Hendricks took him home for dinner, and as they were seated around the table he asked his little boy to pray. The boy was about four years old at the time. He prayed, "Dear Jesus, please take care of the fence in the back yard. Amen." The guest, seated there at the table, looked a little astonished and said something perhaps a little derisive. So Mr. Hendricks explained, "You see, across the fence is the biggest, meanest dog you ever saw. And every day my little boy prays, 'Dear Jesus, please take care of the fence.'"

Do you think that God is concerned about fences, about lost items, about the trivia of your life? Can an infinite God be concerned about things that small? Paul says, "Pray about everything. It doesn't matter what it is. Nothing is beneath the Lord's interest. He is interested in all of the minutiae of your life. Therefore, do not be anxious." Continued fear is something which is simply forbidden to us as believers. We don't have to be anxious. Paul says that we can pray about everything. The result is this strange, inexplicable peace of

God which lays hold of our emotions and our mind and keeps us stable in the most critical situations of life.

There is a final word in verses 8 and 9:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. [And] The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.

Most translations don't connect these two verses, but they should be connected with an "And". These two verbs ought to be linked together - "Think about these things and practice these things," is what Paul is saying. He gives us a little checklist of things to think about - things described here as true, honorable, and pure, and also the things that they see in the Apostle's life and in his writings. In essence he is saying that the checklist for all of our thinking about life is the word of God - things which are pure and true and honorable and just and righteous.

You see, what Paul is saying here is that all of our practices grow out of our thought life. "Think about these things," Paul says, "and you will practice these things." Jesus said, "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he." Our actions grow out of our thoughts. Someone has said, "Our predominant thought determines our immediate action." We act the way we do because we have been pondering things the way we have. There is no exception. So if we think about things the right way, then our actions will be right.

Paul says, "Think about things which are true." Have you ever lied because, long before you actually told the lie, you had fabricated it in your mind? I can remember walking home as a little child, knowing that I shouldn't have done something and fearing that I was going to be caught, and making up a lie in my mind because I knew that downstream I might be asked to give an accounting. And when I lied, it came out very smoothly. It was a very facile lie. But it had its roots in my thoughts.

And do you know that a few months back I was talking to a member of the body here at PBC, and he was asking me about something in my past, and I told him the biggest, most blatant lie you ever heard in your life! The minute I told it I was simply astonished. "Where did *that* come from?" Then I was embarrassed. I started to explain, but I thought, "He'll think I am a kook if I do." There was no way that I could back out of the situation, so I just went on with the conversation. As I walked home I thought, "Good night! What am I going to do?" Then I realized that fifteen or more years ago I had lived that lie in my mind, over and over again. It was a part of the fantasy world I had lived in during that particular period of my life. And now, fifteen years later, when I was asked a question about it, out popped this lie. I had to write the man a letter of apology. The whole episode was really embarrassing, but I learned again, first hand, the truth of this passage. What you think is what you are. Our actions spring quite naturally out of our thoughts.

Paul says, "Think about things which are honorable. Think about things which are right. Think about things which are pure." I am so convinced that moral impurities in our actions grow out of our thought-life. That is where they have their source. If you deal with them there, then they won't become problems as actions.

Paul says, "If you think about these things, if you ponder these things, if (literally) you 'reckon on' these things, and you practice them, then the God of peace will be with you." Have you discovered that? When we behave as God intends us to behave there is a great sense of peace. Jesus said that his joy was to do the will of the Father. And our sense of joy and peace and quietness of heart grows out of our obedience to the truth.

These past three weeks I have been teaching a course in the Pentateuch on Wednesday nights. As we studied through the life of Cain, I was struck again by a principle in that story. Cain worshiped in an unacceptable fashion. God, evidently, repeatedly had told him how he should worship but Cain, out of his own self-interest, refused to worship in the prescribed way. He would not offer a lamb. The lamb symbolized the giving up of a life, the yielding up of a life to God. That was the acceptable method of worship, but Cain had his own method. He offered the fruit of his hands, representing his own labors - the

God told him how he ought to worship, but Cain refused and, the account says, "his countenance fell". These words are very descriptive. Did your countenance ever fall? Have you felt guilt such that your spirit has been depressed and your countenance has fallen? That is what happened to Cain. And the Lord said a very interesting thing to Cain: "Cain, sin is like an animal crouching at the door. And it will master you if you continue to go in this way. Sin will control your life. But if you master it, there will be a lifting up of your countenance."

This is what happens to us as well. If we respond to the truth there is a lifting up of our countenance. There is a sense of joy and peace, of contentment, and a quietness of heart which comes from doing what is right. Someone has said, "There is no abounding life apart from the abandoned life." It is only when we fling our life away, and we are willing to go God's way in entirety, that we have the kind of life which God has destined us to have - a life of joy, of peace, and of quietness and contentment of spirit.

Lord, these are mighty words! It would certainly take a mighty effort on our part to obey - if it were up to us. We thank you, Lord, that you are the one who gives us both the will and the power to respond to these truths. We thank you that when we do your will there is a sense of uplifting. If we are here today with an area of our life about which you are speaking to us, we pray, Lord, that you will deal with that area, and that we will be willing to sit in judgment on it and to accept your strength in order to respond in obedience. We thank you again for the way in which the Word speaks to every area of life - to all those areas which trouble us and confuse us - and gives us the answers. And we thank you for what you already have done for us, in Christ's name, Amen.

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Series: Are You Rejoicing?
Seventh Message
Philippians 4:2-9
January 28, 1973
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[Back to Index Page for David Roper](#)
[Peninsula Bible Church Home Page](#)

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