

The Secret of Living

Philippians 4:4-7

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If I were to select one passage in Paul's writings that captures the secret of living, for me it would be these verses from Philippians.

A couple of introductory words. First Paul was writing from *prison*. And yet, the letter is full of joy and thanksgiving. He says, I am imprisoned, but the gospel is not! So let's be thankful.

Second, the letter is full of *affection*, the affection he had for the Philippian church. So right at the beginning he writes:

I thank my God in every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy. (Philippians 1:8)

"Thankful", he goes on, for our *KOINONIA EIS TO EUANGELION*, our companionship, partnership in the gospel. That's what we have here, a *koinonia*, companionship, partnership in the gospel. And I give thanks for it and for you every day.

I JOY

Now to the passage. The first word is Joy. “Rejoice in the Lord, and again I say, rejoice!” Whenever joy happens, it is the gift of God. Poet Mary Oliver writes in her poem “Don’t Hesitate”.

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy,
 don’t hesitate. Give in to it...
 whatever it is, don’t be afraid
 of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.¹

So, rejoice in the Lord, for he is the Lord of joy.

II Gentleness

The second word is gentleness: “Let everyone know your gentleness.” What a beautiful way to be known as a Christian.

The first step is to be gentle with yourself. We can be so hard on ourselves. We tell ourselves the most terrible things about ourselves. The Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, urges us to be gentle with ourselves. The Buddhist word is *maître*. Be-friend your own self as you would most like to be befriended by another.

Then we are more ready to be gentle with others. Lives are fragile: Handle With Care.

A French spiritual writer in the last century, Henri Amiel, offered these words:

Life is short.

And we do not have much time

to gladden the hearts of those

who travel the way with us.

So be swift to love

and make haste to be kind.

So be gentle, be gentle, be gentle with yourself and others.

III The Lord

The third word is, “The Lord”. Paul adds this important word: “The Lord is at hand”. The Lord is near, nearer than your own breath, as close as the beating of your heart. Closer. Near in love, in joy, in compassion, in peace.

Christ is *immediate* to us, no one in-between. There is no mountain to climb, no wall to tear down, no maze to maneuver, no test to pass, no formidable journey to take. The Lord is near. “The kingdom of God”, Jesus said, “is within you, among you, in your midst”. Here is the meaning of the Incarnation: The Lord is near.

IV Anxiety and Prayer

Paul now addresses what we all experience, anxiety:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

When anxious, Paul says, *pray*. Pray about the *everythings* of your lives.

We might say, “Have no anxiety about *anything*? What planet do you live on?”

Anxiety is part of the human condition. It is part of the evolutionary equipment we are given to help us deal with threat. Anxiety tries to keep us safe.

But Paul is addressing *out-size* anxiety, the kind that keeps our minds in distress, the kind that makes you dizzy and that makes your vision start to go dark. Anxiety run amok. Sometimes anxiety reaches a point that requires the help of psychiatrists and therapists. These can be our helpers alongside God. Paul addresses here the spiritual component.

The poet W.H. Auden considered our era in history as “The Age Of Anxiety”, but the Bible tried to address it 3,000 years ago. So the Psalms says:

The Lord is my light and salvation
whom shall I fear? (Psalm 27:1)

And in Psalm 37 we hear the oft given word: “Fret not!” Fret not over the evil-doers!

We might say: “Fret not?! O.K., *How* not?”

The Bible offers a number of “how nots.” In last week’s psalm, the Psalmist in distress hears the words, “Cast thy burdens upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee.” Maybe not take it away, but help you bear it, what Paul called the “sufficient grace.”

Sue reminded me this week of Jesus’ instruction when we worry and grow anxious: Consider the lilies, Look at the birds”. Get outside and be with God’s Creation. Here is one of Wendell Berry’s most beloved poems, “The Peace of Wild Things”

When despair for the world grows in me
 and I wake in the night at the least sound
 in fear of what my life and children’s lives may be,
 I go and lie down where the wood drake
 rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
 I come into the presence of wild things
 who do not tax their lives with forethought
 of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.²

Paul's words point here. "Have no anxiety about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication...make your requests be made known to God." We lift the anything and everything to God. Not because God doesn't know already, but because the prayer itself opens our hearts and minds to the presence of God.

As the noted theologian, Mr. Rogers, counseled us: "If you can mention it, you manage it."

Instruction about the way of Contemplative Prayer can help. When at prayer, *Resist* no thought and *Retain* no thought. If we try to resist thoughts flowing in we only make them stronger. Let them flow in, then flow by, then flow out. Which is where the second phrase comes in: "Retain no thought." Imagine yourself on a river bank. A barge floats by. These are our negative thought and feelings. Don't jump on the barge! Let it float on by.

There is some anxiety that is healthy. It's trying to keep us safe. But there's some kinds that do us no good. In this case we need to hear these words I saw this week:

Your anxiety is lying to you.

You are loved and going to be okay.

V Thanksgiving

Paul's next word is about Thanksgiving. "With thanksgiving" he writes. In another place Paul writes: "Be thankful in all circumstances." He didn't say, "*for* all circumstances", but "*in* all circumstances". Remember, Paul is writing these words from prison. Not in some professor's office, on an ivy-covered college campus, not in a tel-evangelist's Lear Jet. In prison. "With thanksgiving", he writes behind bars. Gratitude heals the heart. It is our home in the presence of God

The extraordinary preacher John Claypool, whom I followed in two churches tells about going to see an older man who was in the hospital. He asked the man, "How are you doing?" the man replied, "Preacher, I've only two teeth, but, *thank God*, they meet."

Another story. While I was a pastor in Louisville a member whom I had not met—she lived near Lexington—called me and asked if I would visit her. Here is her story. She was a diminutive woman born with some physical abnormalities. Because of this, as she grew up in Crescent Hill Baptist she had never been baptized as other young people, because she was embarrassed by how she looked.

Now, many years later, she was ill and living in a nursing home and wanted to be baptized. So we talked, then I returned and I brought some water in a flask and using the ancient form of baptism called *affusion*, poured some water gently on her head and forehead and baptized her. She beamed. And then this happened: She was on a liquid morphine drip for her pain. The liquid in the bottle hanging by her bed was blue. She said, “That’s the most beautiful color of blue I’ve ever seen.” Radical amazement, radical gratitude. “With thanksgiving”.

VI The Peace of God

Paul closes with a kind of benediction and assurance:

And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Literally, will “guard you hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Sometimes our hearts and minds need guarding. Paul says the peace of God will stand guard.

The Hebrew scriptures say that God goes before us, and is our “rear guard.” God in front and God in back, to guard.

It is a peace that passes understanding, deeper than our hearts and minds. Peace that is well-being and healing and wholeness. Peace that is the divine presence.

It is the peace Jesus was talking about in his last words to his disciples, his “will and testament” to them, what he was bequeathing to them:

Peace I leave with you
my peace I give to you;
not as the world gives
but as I give.

Let not your hearts be troubled,

Neither let them be afraid. (John 14: 27)

The world around you will offer forms of peace that are fleeting and superficial. And sell it to you for a price! But Jesus offers a deeper peace. The peace of His presence and God’s presence in the mix and midst of our lives.

This was what Saint Patrick brought to Ireland. As a boy he was kidnapped and taken from England to Ireland. Miraculously he escaped. Then later in life he returned to Ireland with the gospel of Christ. Here is the blessing he lived and spoke:

Christ be with me
Christ within me
Christ behind me
Christ before me

Christ beside me
Christ to win me
Christ to comfort
 and restore me
Christ beneath me
Christ above me
Christ in quiet
 and Christ in danger
Christ in hearts
 of all that love me
Christ in the mouth
 of friend and stranger.

And now we come to the table of grace where in the bread and wine Christ “slips through our parted lips.”

1. Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate” *Devotions* (N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2017), p.61.
2. Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things”, *Collected Poems* (San Francisco, North Point Press, 1985), p.69.