

“Rejoice in the Lord Always”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Philippians

Texts: Philippians 2:2-9; Psalm 34:1-22

Many have identified the main theme of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi as the often-repeated exhortation from the Apostle to “rejoice.” This is borne out by the fact that the words for “rejoice” and “joy” occur a dozen times in Paul’s brief Philippian letter. Paul is writing to a church (in Philippi) which he helped to found, and which is now enduring a difficult season of persecution from without (Greco-Roman pagans) and from within (a group of newly arrived Judaizers). Paul’s ultimate intention is to encourage the Philippians to do those things necessary to stand firm in the face of this opposition—among other things, they are to have the same humble attitude as Jesus did, they are to strive to love one another, and they are to be of one mind and one accord. But why would Paul repeatedly exhort the Philippians to rejoice when times of difficulty have come upon them? What does Paul mean by “rejoicing,” and how are we to rejoice in time of trial? It is important to consider this carefully, because most of us can recount times when well-meaning Christians have told us and others “to rejoice” during times of suffering and loss. Far too often someone telling us to rejoice when life has turned sour can easily take on a tone of smugness or triteness, which, of course, is far from what Paul actually means.

We have come to that point in our series on Philippians when it is time to address the manner of how we ought to read the so-called “practical sections” of Paul’s letters. This will be a refresher course for many of you. This will help to understand why Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians (and to all Christians) to rejoice in the midst of our trials and difficulties should make perfect sense to a Christian who understands the distinction between the law and the gospel (or the indicative and the imperative moods). This distinction is so important to get right (and so difficult to do at first) that Martin Luther once quipped that anyone who mastered these distinctions should be immediately awarded their doctoral cap and gown. This is one the most fundamental distinctions in all of Christian theology. Philippians 4:2-9 (our text) which includes Paul’s final and repeated exhortation for Christians to “rejoice” provides a good test case to illustrate this distinction.

The law of God (the Ten Commandments) requires us to do certain things—the law says “do.” When we fail to do these things, or do the opposite of what is commanded by God, we sin and are therefore guilty before God. The gospel, on the other hand, announces to us the good news that God freely gives to us in the person of Jesus, all the things he demands of us under the law. If the essence of the law is “do,” the essence of the gospel is “done.” In Jesus and his saving merits, all that God commands us to do has already been done by Jesus, for us, and in our place. Through faith, his obedience becomes ours.

The imperative and indicative moods are closely related to the law and gospel. Imperatives are commands—“do this.” We find them throughout the Bible, and in Paul’s letters they tend to come in the second half—the so-called practical sections of his epistles. Paul has given the Philippians a number of exhortations (imperatives) throughout this letter to do certain things in order to stand firm in the face of persecution. A statement made in the indicative mood is simply a statement of fact and is not a call to do something, but to accept something as true, as for example, God has provided all that is necessary for you to be delivered from his wrath in the person of his son, Jesus. The law corresponds with the imperative mood (a command), while the gospel corresponds with the indicative mood (a statement of fact).

You cannot more fundamentally misunderstand Paul's exhortations such as this one to rejoice (which usually come in the last portion of his letters) than by attempting to understand and act upon the imperatives apart from a prior understanding of the indicatives from which they arise. To read Paul's exhortations (so as to be practical and relevant, and to avoid the hard work of thinking through the doctrinal sections) apart from the prior gospel indicatives (Paul's description of all those things God has done for us in Christ) is to command us to do things which we cannot do. The law (the imperative) brings us further frustration and condemnation. The exhortation for a suffering Christian to "rejoice" without reference to, or a proper understanding of the gospel, is not a word of encouragement, but can be downright cruel.

Yet, once the wonderful promises of the gospel are set before us (i.e., the indicative), then we realize that our failure to obey the imperatives no longer condemns us. In fact, once we understand the indicative (what has already been done for us in Christ), striving to obey what God has commanded of us is only natural, knowing that obeying these commandments does not gain for us salvation, but does serve to mold us into the image of Jesus who has already saved us and fills us with his blessed Holy Spirit.

This is why our own Heidelberg Catechism considers the commandments of God (which we are to obey—just as we are to obey the exhortations given us here by Paul) under the heading of "gratitude." When we compare ourselves to the commandments of God, we see how sinful we are (guilt). This awareness of sin, drives us to Jesus and his saving benefits (grace). Then these same commandments which once condemned us (as the "teacher of sin"), now become our delight and we desire to obey them (the "rule of gratitude"). Not to gain eternal life mind you, but because we already have eternal life.

This is why we are to strive to obey God's commandments, because of all that Jesus has done for us, and which is already ours through faith in his promises. When we consider what Jesus has already done for us, it is only fitting and right to rejoice in all circumstances—good as well as bad. If we get this wrong, we see the exhortation to rejoice in bad times as a cruel mockery. If we get this right—and consider all those things God has done for us in Christ, none of which we deserved—then we can rejoice in our trials because of the knowledge that this is pattern of the Christian life established by Jesus himself, who lived a life of suffering, for us and in our place, and who was then raised from the dead and given that name which is above every other name. Jesus' suffering gives way to his exaltation. The same is true for us.

Before we consider Paul's exhortation to "rejoice," an exhortation given to a church facing real persecution—even if holding up quite well—we will briefly review the indicatives already given us by Paul earlier in this letter. Paul has already called the recipients of this letter, "saints." They have been called by God to be holy and are set apart for his purposes (1:1). God has already begun his good work of new creation in them and will see it through to the day Christ returns (1:6). Along with Paul, the Philippians are the recipients of God's grace (1:7). The Philippians will be pure and blameless on judgment day (the day of Christ Jesus) and are presently filled with fruit of righteousness (1:11). The Philippian's prayers have been heard by Jesus who is sustaining Paul (1:19) while he is a prisoner (and under house arrest in Rome). Paul can thank God for the Philippian's progress in the gospel and their joy and faith (1:25). The destruction of the enemies of the gospel is as sure as the salvation of the Philippian Christians (1:29). God has granted the Philippians faith in Jesus and even called them to suffer as Jesus did (1:30).

After recounting the humility and suffering of Jesus giving way to his exaltation (the first part of Philippians 2), Paul reminds them that God is already at work in them to will and do of his good pleasure (2:13). In chapter 3, Paul reminds the Philippians, that unlike the proud and boastful Judaizers, even Gentile believers in Jesus are the true circumcision before God. The Philippians worship God in the

Spirit and glory in Christ Jesus. They put no confidence in the flesh (3:3). As Paul explains the joy of having a righteousness not his own, but which comes through faith in Jesus, Paul clearly is reminding that Philippians that the same thing is true for them (3:9). He tells them that their citizenship is already in heaven, that they are pilgrims on the earth—yet serving as ambassadors of Christ through his earthly embassy, the church (3:20). As such the Philippians await their Savior Jesus’ return from heaven knowing that he will transform their lowly bodies into the same glorious resurrection body, because Jesus possesses all power (3:21).

Although there have been various exhortations scattered about through the first three chapters, the indicatives I have just recited make it clear that the Philippians are to heed Paul’s exhortations precisely because the indicatives are true. They are promises of the gospel. This is a congregation of Christian believers who have no difficulty in understanding justification (unlike the Galatians). Paul can speak of many of them as mature. It is because this is the case that Paul exhorts them, rather firmly, in 4:1, “*stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*”

Now think for a minute about the effects of being exhorted to stand firm without any consideration of the indicatives just mentioned. It would be all too easy to interpret Paul as saying, “stand firm or else you will not be saved on the day of Christ Jesus.” The Roman church tells us that unless we read and understand Paul in this way, we will commit the sin of presumption and mistakenly assume that we are already saved, and that we will not strive to stand firm so as to be justified. But does it not make more sense of this epistle to take Paul to be telling the Philippians to stand firm in the face of persecution because they know who they already are in Christ and that on the day Jesus returns, all wrongs will be made right, and all of God’s people will receive their promised inheritance?

If we are longing (with Paul) that we “*may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,*” are we not more likely to stand firm based upon the promise of the gospel, than if we do as Rome tell us to do and attempt to stand firm now, because if we do not, we might not make it all the way to the end, because we may commit a mortal sin and be severed from Christ? This is why these distinctions are so important, and this is why unless we understand all the indicatives that Paul has laid out before the Philippians, we risk completely misunderstanding him, when he emphatically urges the Philippians (and us) “to rejoice.” In light of the greatness of what is already ours in Christ (the indicatives), how can we not rejoice under any and all circumstances (as Paul exhorts us—the imperative). Indeed Christians can rejoice with smiles of joy, or in tears of pain and sorrow. Why? Because we know how things turn out in the end on the day of Christ Jesus.

As we turn to our text, beginning with Philippians 4:2, Paul is starting to wrap up his letter after issuing his pointed exhortation in Philippians 4:1 for the Philippians to stand firm. In verse 2, Paul addresses an apparent on-going feud between two women in the Philippian church. It would follow from his exhortation to stand firm that those who are divided are not able to stand firmly in times of trial. Paul writes, “*I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.*” We do not know how Paul knew about this feud, or what was the actual nature of the dispute. Paul had known these women from his time in Philippi ten years or so earlier, and Epaphroditus probably brought news to Paul that these two ladies were divided over some issue, about which, we are not told.

It is almost certain that the Philippian congregation knew of the division, which is why Paul exhorts these two ladies to get over whatever it was that divided them, and to “*agree in the Lord.*” Since their feud seems to be a threat to the health of the church—especially during a time of trial—Paul, in effect, exhorts them to put their common bond in Jesus ahead of their own personal stake in whatever it was that divided

them. Since Paul felt that the Philippian congregation was blessed with a number of mature members, he will speak frankly about the trouble and then exhort them by name to put their unity in Christ first. Paul expects the mature believers in Philippi to help these two ladies come to a common understanding (“in the Lord”), thereby putting their feud to rest.

The apostle tells us in verse 3, “*Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*” That Paul wanted the mature in the church to help them resolve their differences is probably a sign that the matter was of some concern in the church. Paul does not tell us who his “true companion” is (his yokefellow—*syzygos*) because presumably the Philippians knew whom he meant. But there have been those who have argued that *syzygos* may be a proper name—so Paul does reveal who this is.¹ More than likely, however, this is not a proper name and everyone in Philippi knew who Paul’s true companion was, perhaps Timothy, Silas, over even Luke. Paul is confident that this man—whoever he is—can help these two women solve their dispute.

When Paul says of Euodia and Syntyche that they labored side by side with him, together with a man named Clement, as well as many others who are not named, he is likely referring to their collective efforts when the gospel was first preached by Paul in Philippi, when the Philippian church was first founded. This is why it is all the more sad that these two women have had a falling out. This would explain why Paul considers it so important that these two dear saints be reconciled with one another. Their names are all recorded in the Book of Life so they will spend eternity together—which, by the way is itself another indicative! This is yet another sad reflection of human sin and selfishness (to which we all are prone) and which remains within us until we die or Christ returns, whichever comes first.

As Paul is wrapping up, in verse 4 he once again offers a familiar exhortation to his beloved Philippians. “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.*” This admonition is addressed to the whole congregation (and by inference, to us as well) and is given by a man (Paul) who is himself facing an appearance before Caesar which may lead to Paul’s execution. The language Paul uses is repetitive for the sake of emphasis. In fact, we could translate the sentence as follows: “keep on rejoicing in the Lord at all times, regardless of what may come upon you.”² But then, this raises the question of what, exactly, does Paul mean by this exhortation to “rejoice,” especially when we consider that the author of the exhortation, as well as those receiving it, are in the midst of great difficulty. Why rejoice when things are bad? What if we do not feel much like rejoicing?

Let us be clear about what Paul is not commanding. For one thing, Paul is not telling us that we pretend things are good when they are not. Paul is a realist about such things and would fail miserably as a greeting card writer. Sin produces real guilt and consequences. Suffering is never fun nor easy. It helps to realize that rejoicing (joy), is not the same as happiness, which is the opposite of sadness. Happiness and sadness are emotional states tied to our current situations. But Paul is not here thinking of whether our circumstances are good or bad. Neither is he telling us to see good in the midst of the bad—no silver linings in times of trial (well, there may be silver linings, but finding them is not what Paul is asking us to do here). He is not telling the Philippians that they should rejoice because they will eventually die and be with the Lord. There has long been recognition that God gives a special joy in death to those whom the

¹ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 480.

² O’Brien, *Philippians*, 485.

Lord calls to be martyrs. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. What then does he mean?

Paul's exhortation to rejoice is tied to our union with Christ—"rejoice, in the Lord." We are to rejoice (be joyful), knowing that we are presently and permanently "in Christ." Through faith in God's promises, we are united to Jesus, who is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, and praying for us that our faith will not fail. We are to rejoice in this knowledge because it means that nothing which happens in this life (good or bad) can sever that bond with the Risen and Ascended Jesus. Paul has told the Philippians that they are to look for the day of Christ Jesus and run the race of life accordingly. But even if we tire and give up, or fall down, fail, or quit, our bond with Christ (our union with him) cannot be severed. Reminding ourselves of this bond motivates us to get back in the race.

Paul reminds the Philippians that God has begun a good work in his people and will bring it to completion, and that even now our citizenship is in heaven, where we look to a Savior who one day will return, thereby assuring that all those who presently in Christ will attain to the resurrection of our bodies. That which Rome considers sin—the presumption of salvation—is the very ground Paul gives for our rejoicing. Just thinking about this assurance stirs our hearts to "rejoice," along with producing other good works. Why? Because we can look at the evil in the world, the sin within our own hearts, as well as any bad circumstances which come our way (in the providence of God), knowing that we are Christ's and that we will attain to the resurrection—regardless of our current struggles and trials. We are united to Jesus with a bond that cannot be broken. Perhaps, Paul said it best at the end of Romans 8 (vv. 28-39).

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This, beloved, is why we are to rejoice in our trials. We are united to a Savior who gives himself to us, no matter what we must endure in this life. If this is true, how can we not rejoice?

At this point, Paul gives several additional exhortations. In verse 5, he writes, "*let your reasonableness be known to everyone.*" The word here rendered "reasonableness" is usually understood in the sense of gentleness. The implication is that the Philippians were not to be seen as quarrelsome trouble-makers to outsiders. This exhortation was almost certainly framed in light of the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche. The practical advice is that Christians ought to be winsome and not contentious with those outside the church. Imagine the impact upon our neighbors if Christ's church was characterized by gentle reasonableness and not by self-righteousness or scandal. Paul is not asking us to be wusses, but is

exhorting us that when we stand up for truth and principle we do so in an agreeable, gentle manner. The overriding principle is that we let people be offended by the content of the gospel, not by our behavior in communicating that gospel. If the gospel offends someone, well then so be it. But shame on us if we are offensive in our presentation of the gospel.

Once again, Paul invokes our heavenly citizenship in language which reflects the Psalter. He tells the Philippians to rejoice and be reasonable because “*the Lord is at hand.*” In other words he is always near to his people and is never far off. The closing verses of Psalm 34 (our Old Testament lesson) are undoubtedly in Paul’s mind. “*When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. . . . The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.*” This expression also echoes language in Psalm 119 and 145.³

Because the Lord is always near to us, Paul can comfort the Philippians with the reminder, “*do not be anxious about anything.*” We may stew and fret about all kinds of things, but we are far less likely to lose perspective and then excessively worry, if we remind ourselves and each other, of all those things we truly possess by virtue of our union with Christ. Because our citizenship is in heaven where Jesus is now interceding for us, Paul can tell that we avoid anxiety by simply communicating our worries about our lives and needs to God. “*In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*” God already knows what we need, so we are not giving him any new information. Rather, in making our needs known to him we are being reminded of our dependence upon our Creator-Redeemer, and we are being prepared to receive all the good things he has for us.

Should we do this, as Paul points out, “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*” If Jesus was raised from the dead and rules over all things in that same power, then, as the old saying goes, “nothing can happen to us which does not first pass through the will of God.” God is directing all things to his appointed end—the day of Christ Jesus.

Even a lifetime of suffering—as difficult as that would be to endure—is but a millisecond in the span of eternity. Because we are creatures bound by time and space it is often hard for us to see the big picture, but that is what Paul exhorts us to do, and is why he speaks of the Christian life in terms of an athletic competition, a race, a marathon. We must set our minds on the horizon (the resurrection) even as we struggle in the present. This is why we rejoice in good times and bad—we are in Christ and cannot be severed from him. This means God is near, our righteousness is not our own, our sins have been washed away, and we are indwelt by God’s Spirit, who ensures that we are raised from the dead on the last day.

It is with these wonderful gospel indicatives in his mind, that Paul now tells the Philippians, “*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.*” This advice sounds completely foreign in a culture like ours which is drowning in things which are false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, ugly, not commendable, lacking excellence and totally unworthy of praise. Paul is exhorting us to remember the immutable principle of the life of the mind—garbage in, garbage out.

³ O’Brien, Philippians, 488-89.

If we fill our minds with things contrary to that which is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise, then we are pouring gasoline on the burning embers of our sinful hearts. It is very hard to wage war upon sin and stand firm in the face of persecution if we fill our minds with things false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, ugly, not commendable, lacking excellence and totally unworthy of praise, which now characterizes much of American celebrity culture and politics, spreading everywhere almost instantaneously through social media. If we fill our minds with the things Paul says we should, our sinful propensities are restrained a bit, and it is far easier to live lives of gratitude, and then stand firm in the face of persecution.

In verse 7, Paul appeals to the example he set for the Philippians (and others) in doing precisely this. *“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”* Ever the realist, Paul is saying, in effect, meditate on moral filth and you make your struggles worse. Follow my example, and receive what Jesus has given to Paul, believe the gospel indicatives and obey the imperatives of the law, then, Paul says, we will have peace with God.

The question for us is a very simple one—“where are your affections, passions, and interests?” On things false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, ugly, not commendable, lacking excellence and totally unworthy of praise? Or things true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise? If you pour gasoline on the smouldering embers of indwelling sin, then you shouldn’t be surprised when the Christian life becomes an intense struggle. It is hard to rejoice when you wallow in moral filth. But if we strive to do the things Paul has exhorted us to do—and then stand firm in the face of persecution, then as we consider just who we are in Christ, as well as meditate on what Jesus has done for us, then we will “rejoice in the Lord always,” because that is what Christians who look to Christ’s cross and empty tomb will quite naturally do. As we do this, we will find ourselves standing firm in the face of whatever troubles God is pleased to send our way.