

How to be Joyful & Gentle—Philippians 4:4-5—2/19/23

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Open your Bibles to Philippians 4 & let's read the context where we continue our study—follow along as I read Philippians 4:1-9. [READ]

We pick up in verses 4-5 on rejoicing & gentleness, 2 areas connected by context though not connected by the grammar.

At first reading on one level, verses 4-5 seem simple & straightforward & not something we need to spend a lot of time discussing.

But as you begin to meditate on how to apply these verses & why they matter, you realize we need some clarity & caution.

For example, much has been made in the past several decades about emotions in the Christian life & particularly about joy.

Many of you think of the ministry of John Piper & the joy that rises in you when you hear him preach on Christ's supremacy.

Piper clarified how right it is for God to command worship of Himself because He is the sum & source of all goodness & love & beautiful.

It would not be loving or right for God to direct us elsewhere.

And since God is the supreme good, then rightly worshipping Him includes delighting in who He is & what He has done.

It only makes sense that God is most honored when we gladly affirm & experience that He is truly good & wise.

Serving God without appreciation for Him dishonors Him.

Begrudgingly or bitterly going through the motions of obeying God does not exalt God as He deserves.

So Piper called for making much of God as our highest treasure.

Piper has repeated the phrase that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him*.

By that, Piper rightly defined faith to include appreciation & affection & allegiance toward Christ as the Person we know & trust & follow.

God is experienced & displayed more fully when we are most thankful & content in His sufficient grace & promises.

That fullest satisfaction in Christ is linked to & expressed as joy.

Those are all precious & biblical truths John Piper trumpeted.

I praise God for ways He has used timely truths that Piper gleaned from Scripture's exegetical details & overarching themes.

But as Piper struck chords of joy in many hearts, he also raised questions he sought to answer & emphases he sought to adjust.

As can often happen, a generation of followers may react to or add to an emphasis beyond the biblical purposes of their teacher.

We often swing the pendulum from one area that needed correction to an opposite overemphasis that needs balancing.

That happened at times in the emphasis on joy & affection for God.

So I pray that our look at joy in these verses can help to correct some of that & protect us & answer related questions.

For example, one question that arises is whether a Christian can lack joy or struggle to have joy when we should be glad to know God—in other words, should you doubt your salvation if you are not happy?

Another question is whether we should focus on producing joy since joy is a fruit of the Spirit & some see that as spontaneous.

Others ask if all this is overblown because of the influx of charismatic theology into Reformed & evangelical churches.

Or some ask if a focus on emotions is from the soundbite shallowness of the culture or the feminization of the church or the popularity of sentimental songs & manipulative speakers.

Others assume different personalities are just more or less emotional.

Listen—how you think about such things should not be based on your own preferences or experiences or comfort levels.

We need to think biblically & act accordingly & I pray that today's message will help us in this area of rejoicing & also in the area of gentleness that has been another hot topic the past few years.

I won't go into it, but Jesus as gentle & lowly has been another recent overemphasis that has brought debate & correction.

We want responses to be biblically faithful & not merely reactionary.

So we're going to dive into 7 descriptions of biblically balanced rejoicing & gentleness as seen in Philippians 4:4-5.

I'm going to outline 4 descriptions of proper rejoicing & 3 descriptions of proper gentleness as we unpack the details of Philippians 4:4-5.

Let's start by simply reading Philippians 4:4 again. [READ]

The 1st point to note is that proper rejoicing is commanded—that's obvious but we need to say it—#1, proper rejoicing is commanded.

The first word of verse 4 is a command—a 2nd person plural imperative addressed to all of Paul's readers in the church at Philippi & by application to all Christians of all times.

It is not optional—it is not only for certain personalities or groups.

Proper rejoicing is normative & needed for every Christian individually & for all Christians together collectively.

Names written in the book of life in verse 3 maybe reminded Paul of Jesus' call to rejoice in Luke 10:20 & Matthew 5:12 that your names are written in heaven & you have reward in heaven.

Rejoicing is a theme of this letter that Paul repeated as you can see in chapter 3 & verse 1 where we read the same command.

Remember the context of the command in chapter 3 was that rejoicing was a safeguard in sound doctrine against false teachers.

Proper rejoicing glories in Christ rather than in ourselves.

As opposed to those who put confidence in the flesh, Paul gloried & exulted & boasted & rejoiced in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

What we rejoice in matters because it shows who & what we trust & treasure & that is vital to salvation.

So we dare not dismiss joy as only for weak-willed or unstable people or for those who prefer expressive singing or emotional preachers.

No matter what background or inclinations or preferences we have, we must value proper rejoicing as commanded by God.

Paul modeled this in this letter by rejoicing when Christ was preached even by those with mixed motives in chapter 1, verse 18.

He rejoiced in being poured out sacrificially to serve the Philippians in chapter 2, verses 17-18 & called them to rejoice with him as they mutually shared their joy.

He called them to welcome Epaphroditus with joy in 2:29 & he urged them to make his joy complete in 2:2 by their unity with one another.

So rejoicing was not superfluous or unnecessary for Paul.

That's why we need songs like we sang earlier saying, "*Rejoice the Lord is King*" as an expression from Psalm 97 as we shout joyfully to the Lord as Psalm 100 says.

We find such rejoicing in Psalm 13:5; 21:1; 35:9; 40:16; 71:23 & many more psalms & Scriptures.

We find rejoicing over God providing & saving & protecting & for His love & grace & mercy & faithfulness & truth & wisdom & power.

The God revealed in Scripture as the Trinity & reconciled to us through the Lord Jesus is our boast to glory in with great joy.

2nd Corinthians 13:11 closes a lengthy letter with the command to rejoice & 1st Thessalonians 5:16 says to rejoice always.

Paul had modeled & called for rejoicing in this letter while he was in prison & his readers faced opposition & with concerns of divisiveness inside the church & false teachers outside.

In all such circumstances, rejoicing was & is commanded.

The command in Philippians 4:4 is a present tense with a continual emphasis as an ongoing habitual practice.

In that sense we can note a 2nd point about the kind of rejoicing we said is commanded—point #2, note that proper rejoicing is continuous.

Point #2—proper rejoicing is continuous.

In addition to the tense that makes this point, we also notice that the verse clearly says to rejoice ALWAYS.

Rejoicing is important & incessant as a persistent practice.

Rejoicing is not something to do merely when you gather with brothers & sisters to sing or share praises.

Rejoicing is not something to do only when God provides a need or answers prayer or shows you some kind providence.

Rejoicing is a constant part of the daily battle of faith that helps us practice what we'll see in verse 8 as a focus on right thinking.

Cultivating habitual praise to express gladness & gratitude to God can be a powerful strategy of spiritual warfare.

But we need to get the specificity of this strategy by noting the sphere in which this rejoicing is to take place.

It is only in this sphere that such rejoicing can take place in a fallen & broken world that is filled with sorrows & struggles.

It would be ridiculous & even potentially cruel to claim that all we need is a constant pat on the back to tell us to check out & cheer up.

The Bible does not command vague happiness or vacuous joy.

Where does Philippians 4:4 say this rejoicing can occur?—it is in the Lord—it is only in the Lord that any lasting rejoicing can be possible.

This is not a call for silly, giddy, mindless smiles or an endless supply of funny jokes or catchy tunes to forget your troubles.

Point #3 to note today is that proper rejoicing is Christ-centered, that it is "in the Lord", meaning in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Proper rejoicing is commanded, continuous & Christocentric or Christ-centered as Philippians 4:4 says—it is in the Lord.

Paul did not intend for us to rejoice only if & when we escape hard situations like he & the Philippians faced & like we all face at times.

No. He said to rejoice in the Lord who is sovereign over all circumstances.

This is a call to rejoice not in circumstances that always change but in Christ who never changes & is secure in whatever circumstances.

Paul he was commanding this as something that must be continually cultivated inwardly & expressed outwardly.

Emphasizing joy as spontaneous & untethered has led some to unnecessarily question their salvation or spiral inward into doubt or despair over their perceived lack of spirituality.

So we need to get this straight—this rejoicing is in the Lord, meaning it has a focus on who Christ is & all He has done & all He promises in His grace for His people.

Being in Christ, in the Lord, is a gargantuan endless spring of eternal delights that are guaranteed for all who come to Christ.

But we must drink—we must take the nourishing water of His Word into our hearts & minds to freshly recall & believe & then to act in faith to rejoice in them as we rejoice in Him.

Rejoicing can only be continuous when it is in the Lord because only in the Lord do we have an anchor that always holds.

As we'll sing to close today's service, in Christ we have a sure & steady anchor to hold us in the storms of life.

In Christ is the power of the Spirit to strengthen us to trust & obey & apply His Word by His grace every hour even in trials as James 1 says.

Only the Lord will never change & never let us down.

Other people will fail us & sadly we will disappoint one another even when we hope we never will like Peter professed to Christ.

Paul was saying this immediately after mentioning conflict between people who had been faithful coworkers with him.

Proper rejoicing is not chiefly in how great the people around us are though we can & should certainly be thankful for those around us.

But others can't be our fountain of joy—it must be the Lord.

We won't find lasting joy in possessions or experiences or successes—it will all lose its newness & we will want more or newer or better.

Unshakeable joy is only in the Lord & this is a call to think on Him to stir & sustain & share that joy of knowing Him.

That's how we approach this command & don't get overwhelmed by it as impossible or unrealistic or as a mystical feeling we fail to sustain.

It is overwhelming and impossible just like husbands loving our wives like Christ loved the church is overwhelming & impossible apart from God's grace by the power of the Spirit.

That's why we approach this in Christ by faith, we obey in faith depending on the Spirit as God's promised power, knowing this is supernatural & it is a fruit of the Spirit.

We do not avoid it or rationalize or excuse it away or give up.

Like any other command of Scripture, we obey by grace through faith.

We trust that God has accepted us based on all Christ has done & that He has provided all we need for life & godliness & we step out in obedience by faith.

We act in dependence on God's supply—we choose to rejoice in the Lord as a habit & discipline of grace, as a tool He uses to sanctify us & show His glory through us.

We rejoice in the Lord to battle depression & overcome despair & to fight grumbling & discontent & bitterness & other sins.

And I must say that I thank God for many of you who live this out & challenge & encourage me by your example & reminders.

When we are tempted to forget this command or to minimize it, I pray we will remind each other with songs & expressions of glad praise & questions to prompt us to praise.

I need you to help me to practice this because I feel my need for it.

I feel a bit like I did when I preached Philippians 2:14 about doing ALL things without grumbling or disputing.

I realized how pervasive my grumbling was as that text sat on my mind all week & this week I have felt how absent my rejoicing is.

But get this—it's almost like Paul anticipated objections or excuses or questions or caveats & so the Spirit moved him to write the rest of the verse so read it again. [READ]

Ok—just in case you wanted to think that rejoicing was only important for singers or preachers or talkative types or outgoing personalities or those who don't guard their emotions like you do—Paul repeated it.

Again I will say—maybe we can adopt that phrase as a way to recall the importance of rejoicing—again I will say, rejoice.

Proper rejoicing is commanded, continuous, Christ-centered & we might note 4thly that it is crucial.

Point #4—proper rejoicing is crucial.

Christians of all people should be happy people that overflow with thankfulness to God and delight in Him.

If you want to reserve the term happy for circumstantial happiness as distinct from solid, unchanging joy in the Lord, you can do so, but either way believers should be glad in God.

Since we have a home in heaven with an inheritance that will never pass away but will increase in endless joy, 1st Peter 4:13 says we can rejoice even when we share in the sufferings of Christ.

We have the sovereign Ruler over the universe & the final Judge over all on our side & no one can succeed against us.

Romans 8 closes with those truths after opening with assurance that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So if you are in Christ Jesus—then rejoice in the Lord.

Endlessly & obediently rejoice in the Lord.

Think of it—we are born rebels against God who deserve Hell & yet in Christ we have been reconciled to God & forgiven for all our crimes & provided a righteous record.

We don't need to find some fictional happy thought for emotional escape in a kids' story like Peter Pan.

We can choose to call to mind who Christ is & all we have in Him & rehearse His promises & grace & act to rejoice by faith.

Whether we feel a surge of emotional affirmation that is enough to measure on our spiritual happy meter or not, we practice this command as part of the spiritual fight of faith.

We do so, not in an ethereal quest for an undefinable quantity of sufficient spiritual feelings, but in faith to fill our minds with truth that protects us & provides for us.

You & I will never have enough affections or actions to make us acceptable to God & the Gospel tells us to give up trusting such hopes.

We know that our Creator & Ruler has revealed Himself in the Gospel of Jesus Christ & He is trustworthy no matter what our feelings may tell us or not tell us & so we always bank on Him.

We know that Jesus came to earth as the God-man to live perfectly & die sacrificially to pay the punishment for sin & that He rose in victory & He saves fully forever all who trust Him.

So the joy of the Lord is our strength as Nehemiah 8:10 says.

He is the Ruler who provides all that we enjoy & easily take for granted like smiles & smells & tastes & touch.

And the Gospel is that He gives us HIMSELF freely & He does so at the cost of punishing Jesus for our offenses against Him.

Then that relationship is the foundation of assurance that He works all things together for our good as chapters 5 & 8 of Romans explain.

Being in right relationship with God through Christ puts us into the secure circle of God's grace where all His promises & plans are moving toward our fuller experience of Him.

Far above finding joy in shifting circumstances, being in Christ leads us to the joy of the King of the universe who rules every circumstance.

So no matter what you are facing, anchor your soul in the eternally happy reality of being right with God through Christ.

And let that happy reality bring rejoicing in the Lord always.

We can cultivate that alone & with others, by singing & studying & listening to truth & in other ways you know of.

Think of times you've stopped to count your blessings & give thanks.

Remembering who God is & what He has done helps to reset & refresh & purposefully praise Him.

Focusing on truth about God & expressing it in worship can be so transformative of our mindset & mood.

And we can do this even when times are hard.

Paul did it as he wrote this letter from prison just as he had done in the Philippian jail where he was after preaching there as Acts 16:25 says.

Paul practiced proper rejoicing & we can do so too.

And we can also practice proper gentleness & so let's move on to verse 5 to unpack the clarifying truths about that next.

Read verse 5 to see this 2nd point. [READ]

Though it's difficult to see in the English, this is another command.

Christians here are commanded to let something be known—and let it be known to all men, to all people, not just some.

What we're to broadcast far and wide in our relationships with everyone is our forbearing & reasonable spirit.

This word includes ideas of intelligent gentleness, justice with forgiveness, & yielding to others with fairness & equity.

It is sweet, self-controlled, patient thoughtfulness with others.

If you have walked with God for some time, it's helpful to rehearse God's patience with us that can motivate this attitude.

God is not finished with other Christians until they are in glory & He's not finished with non-Christians until their last breath.

So we should be reasonably balanced & decent with all people.

This gentle consideration or reasonableness is like the meekness of Christ explained in Philippians 2 when He did not grasp His equality with God but submitted Himself in love to the Father.

He humbled Himself, not insisting on what He deserved.

He did not demand immediate action to stop all evil or right every wrong or give Him His due honor on the timetable His human flesh might be tempted to insist on it.

That power under control, that meekness, governed Christ in a way that flowed outward in the gentleness 2nd Corinthians 10:1 described in Him with this same word.

This acts on principles to know how to measure right & wrong & to know what needs to be corrected immediately & what can wait.

This is not permission of sin or a lack of faithful steadfastness.

We must be clear that this not blind allowance of whatever.

It is a maturity that is not focused on selfish preferences or self-serving or insisting on your rights or your way.

It is a willingness to sacrifice such small things to love people to move toward them like Christ did for us.

It is being kind & large-hearted & gracious & not isolating & retreating & running from people or issues.

It pictures action & investment with grace & patience.

It's required for elders in 1st Timothy 3:3 & for all Christians in Titus 3:2 & it describes wisdom from above in James 3:17 that is *first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.*"

Think whether that describes you.

The thoughtfulness of this complex character trait means that it is not a wet noodle that caves to any & every whim.

This is a clearly convictional character trait in action in relationship with others & we might note that as a 1st point about gentleness today—proper gentleness is convictional.

This gentleness is principled, standing firm in truth as verse 1 says & being governed & guided by truth to make appropriate sacrifices to serve the needs of others for their spiritual good.

It is not allowing whatever, but it is also not unyielding or ungracious.

Humility anchored in truth is the handle holding gentleness.

In that way, point #5 overall today, proper gentleness is convictional.

And as we said, it is to be made known to all, shown to all.

So as a 6th point overall & a 2nd point about gentleness, we can note that proper gentleness is comprehensive.

Point #6 overall—proper gentleness is comprehensive.

By comprehensive, I mean it is to be evident to all, made known to all men, shown in every relationship in thoughtful, fitting ways.

It is not merely for marriage or for church family or any other specific circle where we might think it fits best.

It is for all men—all people are to have Christian consideration shown to them, to have this kind of Christian moderation known by them.

Then lastly, we might also describe it as confident—point #7, proper gentleness is confident.

And by that I do not mean confident in ourselves.

I mean confident in the Lord, that the Lord is near & the Lord knows & we place our full confidence in Him & His rule.

We can be gentle if we remember who is in charge as Paul noted by closing verse 5 by stating that “the Lord is near.”

God is not blind to or distant from the issues—He sees it all.

So when people try our patience & we want to lash out or grow bitter, we must recall that the Lord knows what is going on.

God has not left His throne or forgotten to be omnipresent.

The Lord is near to the situation you face & He is near to the person you are struggling with who is causing you stress.

We don't have to take revenge or react or speak sinfully when we rest securely in knowing that the Lord is near.

That can be near like Psalm 34:18 & 145:18 say, that the LORD is near to the brokenhearted & to all who call upon Him.

And it can also refer to the coming of the Lord as near in the sense of imminent & possible at any moment.

That sense is found in James 5:8, which says, “*be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.*”

Likely Paul meant both the nearness of the Lord Jesus with His followers as promised in Matthew 28:20 & also the nearness of His return to make all things right.

Ultimately, God knows—Christ is the final Judge & He knows.

Nothing will escape His notice & this life is short & He may return at any time.

That reality can free us from feeling the need to take our own revenge, which Romans 12 commands against.

It can free us to leave it in God's hands to deal with finally.

Then we can have self-control in principled graciousness with people.

In that sense, proper gentleness is convictional & confident.

It's pictured in 1st Peter 2:21-23 that says, “*For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.*”

That is the Lord Jesus in whom we rejoice & rest & reach out.

He is the One of whom 1st Peter 1:8 says, “*though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.*”

If you do not know & love Jesus as your Lord & Savior & Joy & Treasure, we'd love to help you if you will please come talk with one of our leaders after the service.

Knowing Jesus is what leads to proper gentleness & rejoicing.

Proper gentleness is convictional, comprehensive, & confident.

Proper rejoicing is commanded, continuous, Christ-centered & crucial.

I pray those explanations & clarifications are helpful as you & I seek to know & follow Jesus.

May we say with Habakkuk 3:17-18 that, “*Though the fig tree should not blossom, And there be no fruit on the vines, Though the yield of the olive should fail And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold And there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.*”

Pray with me as we close.