

Tuesday, November 25, 2003 PM – Thanksgiving Communion Service
Church of the Nazarene – Patchogue, NY

Be Thankful Always
Philippians 4:4-7

This is a very popular and well-quoted passage. It is also one of my personal favorites, and it has ministered to me greatly over the years. Listen to these powerful words from the Apostle Paul.

Phil 4:4-7 (NIV)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As we read these words – words of power – words of peace – words of comfort, it's hard to imagine they were penned while Paul was in prison, probably in Rome. In fact, it may have been during the days of his trial that he wrote to this church, which he had established a few years earlier, and of which he had great personal interest. His sentence could have been either life or death, yet his message to the church in Philippi was one of hope and Thanksgiving.

Philippi was located in Macedonia. It was a Roman military colony in Europe, and a leading city there. Paul in about A.D. 50 founded the church in Philippi during his second missionary journey. It was the first European church and began with the conversion of Lydia, who then started the meetings in her home. Lydia was a “God fearer,” or a non-Jew who believed in the God of Israel. On January 11, while Pastor Jerry is away in the Dominican Republic, I think I will bring a message to you from Acts 16, where the story of the founding of this church is recorded. This church had always remained a joy to Paul, and the letter to the Philippians is the most personal of Paul's epistles. Even so, Paul writes to address some issues within the Philippian church. It is also interesting that within the 104 verses of this letter, the names, Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus, Lord Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus, Jesus, Christ, Lord, and Savior occur 51 times.

Let's take a closer look at this passage and notice the level of trust in God that is implied. Paul uses global statements in this passage that seem unrealistic to us, especially in this day and age. Listen again to what Paul is trying get us to buy into here. **Rejoice in the Lord always.** How realistic does that sound to you? Have you come to a place where you can say that you rejoice in God always? What would that require of you? How about ... **Do not be anxious about anything?** Are you ever anxious? What does anxiety reveal about your ability to handle situations? Let's be real here – can we live without being anxious about something? Some are anxious about everything! What does Paul offer as a solution to this dilemma? Another global statement, in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

So let's pick this passage apart a little and see if we can get some clarity and make sense out of all this.

- 1- **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again rejoice.”** How can we rejoice in view of our difficulties? Paul repeats this command to show us that he knows about difficulties, but yes, rejoice always – in the Lord. There may be attacks from others, personality clashes among believers, persecution from the world, or threat of imminent death – all of which Paul himself was experiencing at the very time of this writing. However, the Christian is supposed to maintain a spirit of JOY in the Lord. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit and comes as we yield our life to the Spirit, like all the other fruit. We are not immune to sorrow, by any means, and we should be sensitive to the troubles of others around us. Yet, by keeping in the will of God we can experience peace and joy in every circumstance. The New Testament sees joy as something that is independent of circumstances. The believer's joy is found in the inner work of the Holy Spirit, who, despite trials or suffering, is bringing us salvation. Thus joy, like peace, is rooted in trust in the Lord. As for externals, the greatest source of joy for the Christian is found in serving other believers and in seeing God work in their lives. This gives me great joy and reason for Thanksgiving to God. So, trust in God brings joy or rejoicing.
- 2- **“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”** The word for “gentleness” is difficult to translate – “gentle, yielding, forbearing, lenient” are all attempts at translating this word. A key point of its meaning is the willingness to yield one's personal rights and to show consideration and gentleness to others. Gentleness is also a fruit of the Spirit. This quality is easier to be shown to some people than others, but Paul's command and intent here is that we show this gentleness to everyone – anyone at all. Paul encourages the readers with the statement that the Lord is near. The people of this time were expecting the Lord to return in their lifetime – Parousia – his second literal coming. This was a reminder to them (and to us) that at His coming, He will settle all differences and disputes. We need not exhaust our time with such things, just be gentle and do not insist on your own “rights.” Remember there was a dispute going on that Paul addressed in the beginning of this chapter. Look at verse 2-3 - ***I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*** Following this statement, Paul writes to rejoice always, be gentle to all, take it to the Lord in prayer with thanksgiving and receive peace in the circumstance. It takes trust in God to allow us to be gentle toward everyone.
- 3- **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** Believers are to be prayerful in all circumstances rather than anxious. If we bring those things to God that bother us and leave them with Him, Paul promises that we can experience true peace knowing that God listens and answers earnest prayer. We do this with thanksgiving for the release from worry that prayer provides, and we do it with

confidence knowing God is acting for us. 1 Peter 5:7 – ***“Cast all your cares or anxiety upon Him because He cares for you.”*** Anxiety and worry are natural feelings when dealing with the troubles and concerns of this life, but we are instructed to handle them properly. This is accomplished by trusting enough in God to know that He cares and will be involved in all areas that we invite Him into. Jesus deals with anxiety by calling us to an awareness of God. God does exist and He cares. It takes trust in God to remove anxiety and worry.

4- Thanksgiving – (Gr. Eucharistias) Sound familiar?

Yes participation in Holy Communion is participation in Thanksgiving. We can only really be thankful when we understand what Christ has done for us. Because of Jesus we have peace with God – we have fellowship with God – we have justification with God – we have the assurance that He cares and He hears our prayers. The answer to anxiety is prayer, which brings with it an attitude of worship. “Petition” denotes prayers as expressions of need. Thanksgiving should accompany all Christian praying. Whatever God sends is for our good and is in line with His will for us. It may also include remembrance of previous blessings. “Requests” refer to things asked for. When we turn from anxiety to prayer and thanksgiving, God will give us His own **peace**. This peace is for those who are already at peace with God through justification by faith in Christ. God’s peace can accomplish far more than what can come from any human planning or forethought or knowledge. God’s peace far surpasses human comprehension. It guards the believer’s heart and mind from all anxiety and despair. Peace is also a fruit of the Spirit. Are you noticing a pattern here? If we read between the lines of this passage, we could show each of the fruit of the Spirit. Fruit comes as we grow in our relationship with God through trust. Complete trust in God is required to be thankful always.

Remember that this is a process. Nothing happens overnight, generally. We are on a journey with God – a spiritual journey. Each of us is in a different place on that journey, and each of us is traveling along at a different rate on this journey, but we are on the journey God has laid out for us if we have committed our life to Him. However, we also have another promise from Paul in this very letter. In the first chapter, Paul states that he is **“confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”** That is reason for me to give thanks. I am thankful that God is at work in my life. I may stumble along the way, and I may try to handle things in my own strength here and there, but overall I know that God is the One who has begun this work of trust in my life, and He is in me to complete this work to His perfection, not mine.

Thanks is given for the blessings that have come to us through Christ. Thanks is given for those who come to know Christ and who bring joy to Paul’s heart – and ours too. Thanks is given at the Eucharist – Holy Communion – for the broken body and the blood of Jesus. Remembering all that Jesus has done for us and in us, it is appropriate to address every prayer with thanksgiving and receive His peace as a blessing. So, trust in God with every circumstance, every situation, every request and every need, through prayer knowing He is at work in your life and offers you peace.