

division, anxiety and the God of peace

As it says in the bulletin, this morning we are in chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Specifically, **Philippians 4:2-9**.

So if you have a bible with you, open there with me.

Now if you know this passage or have read it recently, you'll know that it is flush with memorable and inspiring verses. If there was **one passage** in all of Philippians that has inspired the most instagram or pinterest quotes – **this is it!**

3. rejoice...

4. let your gentleness

5. do not be anxious..

6. do not be anxious...

7. and the peace of God...

8. whatever is true...

9. keep putting into practice...

And those are just the 7 that I liked best in the two minutes I spent looking on Friday afternoon...

So, in a way, as evidenced by those posts, **this passage** is **super** familiar to many of us.

And **for good reason**.

Honestly, there is so much wisdom – needed wisdom – in these **8 verses**. Verses that speak with stunning clarity into the everyday experiences and realities of our lives – difficult relationships, misplaced

joy, paralyzing anxiety, and the destructive mental loops that we can carry with us everywhere...

Or stated from another vantage point, here in these 8 verses, we find Paul talking about the need for reconciliation, the call to rejoice in the Lord, showing gentleness to all, how to handle anxiety, the thought-life of the wise Christian, and the value of not just *admiring* the way of the godly, but **putting into practice** what we learn from the way of the godly...

I know I've had moments this week where I've wondered how in the world I could speak to **all this**.

And truth is, **I can't**. There are multiple **distinct** verses or lines in this passage that speak so deeply to our individual challenges and needs...

Which is why some of us have portions of this text **memorized** – whether intentionally or unintentionally. We've come back to these verses so many times... prayed them, wrestled with them, found hope in them...

As a result a text like this, for someone like me, can feel impossible to handle **well** – much less, **thoroughly**.

But here's the thing: this passage – **Philippians 4:2-9** – is not just a collection of wise, *but otherwise disconnected* counsel for Christian living...

Contrary to what how we often read it, Paul is not here just addressing one pressing situation and then throwing together some other concluding thoughts – 5 or 6 kernels of Christian wisdom – that can all be handled and unpacked **on their own**.

Not to say that there wouldn't be value in digging **deep** into one verse or portion of this passage. Truth is, I think there are some gems in here that deserve just that – that some of us **need** to dive deep into and work out in our lives.

But even as we do this, we need to be alert to the way that these **individual** verses (about anxiety and prayer, or maybe about where we put our thoughts) are actually a part of **a larger issue** – and actually only make sense (the sense Paul intends) in the light of this larger issue or story...

Simply put, Philippians 4:**4-9** (the famous collection of verses here – that we saw in those pinterest pics) only makes sense in the light of vs.**2-3**. All of Paul's counsel and insight here is directly related to a particular situation that Paul speaks to at the start – **in vs.2-3** – namely, the breakdown of a relationship between two valued leaders in the Philippian church. Two women – named Euodia and Syntyche...

This is the story, the issue that frames and shapes **the whole** of this text...

And I say this – **we know this** – because, as we read through this whole passage – **Phil 4:2-9** – amidst all the seeming rabbit-trails it presents, Paul keeps bringing us back to the very thing that these two women need most – the restoring, reconciling, empowering grace of God – "**the peace of God**" and "**the God of peace**" – as Paul says...

Which is something that not just Euodia and Syntyche need, but **something that we all need – again and again.**

So let's listen together to the whole of this passage.

Philippians 4:2-9.

I'm reading from the updated version of the NIV... **Paul writes.**

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended by my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are written in the book of life.

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

***Finally, brothers and sisters,** whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

Let's pray...

So imagine that you are one of these two women – gathered together with your church community – listening together to this beautiful and personal letter from your beloved founding pastor – the apostle Paul – whom you love and care for and have been concerned about. (he's in prison... again.)

And *all of a sudden*, as you listen with everyone, you hear **your own name** been named by Paul... And not just being named, but being **addressed** by Paul... And not just being addressed, but being **called out**. Your personal grievance with another being publically named... And your being **implored to be reconciled**...

And the other woman is **right there too** – on the **other side** of the room. And she is equally addressed and charged to sort this out.

Talk about **an incredibly awkward moment** – for the two of them, but also for everyone.

I'm sure we can all imagine there being some audible cries of disbelief – shock – that Paul has just come out and said it.

And maybe some sighs of relief, too.

Because, obviously, this situation was **no secret**. It was known about, and felt by many... It must have been a public matter for Paul to have addressed it this way.

But that's not the only reason Paul would have had to address this openly.

Because, truth is, **division in the church** – no matter how hidden or private – **has a way of impacting everyone**. Both inside the church and beyond...

In truth, **this is one the core themes of this whole letter**, isn't it?

This is why we titled our study in Philippians – "**Partners in Christ**". Because, according to Paul (who learned it from Jesus), the gospel is not just a private matter between us and God - getting our hearts right with Jesus, being forgiven of our sin, and living now with hope for a day when God will take us to Himself...

No. The gospel is the good news that in Jesus Christ – in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus – **God is reconciling all** things to Himself... And not just **to** Himself, but **in** Himself...

In Him, we become a reconciling people...

And the church is the fruit of this.

A community called into being by the gospel...

A reconciled people... A community of women and men – from all walks of life – **drawn together – united together** – in Christ, by the Spirit...

Which Paul has explored and unpacked in so many ways in this letter...

How the gospel makes us one – partners in Christ – united together – "*sharers together in grace*"... "*Of one mind, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose...*"

Truth is, **this is** the **greatest** evidence of the Spirit's presence and ministry among us. The greatest evidence of the gospel's reality and power today. Not one particular gift or manifestation, but **God's restoring love, God's reconciling grace** alive in and among His people – empowering us to **be** not just servants **of** Jesus, but **servants like Jesus**... offering up our lives... laying down our lives for the sake of one another...

Along the way, Paul invited the Philippians (and us) to consider the lives of **Timothy and Epaphroditus**, as two shining examples of this kind of humble, sacrificial, servant living in the way of Jesus.

And as they heard the letter read out, just like us, they may have had moments where they raised their voices with an "**Amen**", or a quiet "**yeah, that's right**".

But Paul loves the Philippian church too much to let all this stay as ideas in a letter, or even truth that they say amen to...

And so, in ch.4:2, Paul gets right down to it and **speaks directly** to **Euodia and Syntyche** – two women who's falling out has impacted **the whole church**...

Whether or not they all knew about it.

And what I mean by this, is that ***division in the church, no matter how hidden, always kills the witness of the church.***

Because, as we've just acknowledged, ***the gospel is fundamentally about reconciliation*** – being reconciled ***by God to God*** – and then ***in God, in Christ*** becoming a reconciling people...

The fruit of this *spilling out* into our relationships with one another... especially those to whom we have been united in Christ.

Which is why division the church is so destructive.

Because, as one theologian has put it, "**Where Christians** cannot bear the sight of each other, they will not be able to look the world in the face either." (J.A. Motyer)

For if the gospel is the good news that in Christ, we can be reconciled – first and foremost to God through Christ – and then, in Christ, to one another – ***what fruit can come from division in the church?***

Sadly, it is one of the great **anti**-apologetics for the gospel. It is the reason why many who have grown up in or around the church have not embraced Christ – because the reality of the gospel is undermined or even discredited by Christians who don't want anything to do with one another...

And so Paul writes,

"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these

women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life."

We're not told the nature of the disagreement or injury. Not at all. And maybe that's a gift to us – because it allows **our** disagreements and injuries to be included here.

But Paul does tell us a few things – a few things that we need to hear as we think about our own *Euodia and Syntyche* dynamics.

First, Paul addresses **both** of them, calling them **each** to pursue unity... to pursue reconciliation... *"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord..."*

Although Paul has probably heard some version of the story from Epaphroditus, he doesn't spend any time differentiating who was wronged, and who was wrong (or *more* wrong)... who was right, or more right... As J.A. Motyer states it, "It is not a matter of who is right and who is wrong or what rightness and wrongness exists on each side. The plea is made to each contestant alike..."

He calls them **both** – **each** – to follow the God of peace – to follow in the humble way of Christ and seek peace... unity... reconciliation... For the glory of Christ, for the good of the church...

And one another.

Second, Paul asks for the help of another – his true or loyal companion, he says. Now some translate "companion" as an actual

name – *Syzygos*. Either way, what we learn in this is that working for the unity of the church is **a task we all share together**. Something we **all** need **to help one another** in at times... Something we need to be willing to face and talk openly about at times – as Paul did with the Philippian community, and not just with Euodia and Syntyche.

Right? Paul could have sent a private note to the two of them, or the two of them and Syzygos. But he didn't. Because unity involves and requires all of us. It is our shared task in Christ.

And third, notice how Paul goes on to describe these two women to Syzygos and the community.

What does he say?

Well, depending on your translation, some version of, "*these women contended at my side in the cause of the gospel... [their] names are in the book of life.*"

This is worth paying attention to! Notice that he doesn't malign them, talk down to them or even dwell on their disagreement – rather he invites Syzygos and the Philippian church to regard them with great **honor...**

[As an aside: this is a beautiful glimpse of Paul's attitude toward women in leadership. Here we find Paul celebrating these two women who served **alongside him** – side by side with him in the work of the

gospel. As we study Paul's teaching on this matter, we can't forget his **example**... It is equally instructive...]

Ok, back to our main conversation.

In all that Paul says here about these two women, we actually catch sight of Paul doing what he exhorts the Philippians (and us) to do **a few verses later**. [And this is where we begin to see the connection between vs.2-3 and what follows.] Instead of dwelling on the faults or weaknesses of these two women, Paul speaks from a mind fixed on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable – in these women.

This, according to Paul, is a vital step in pursuing reconciliation. One that we need Euodia and Syntyche, and we need to learn...

Think about a relationship that is difficult for you – maybe it's a particular person, maybe it's a group of people (your union at work, or some social subculture or political group...).

How often and how easy is it, in times of relational breakdown, to only **dwell** on what we perceive to be the failings, faults or wrong-motives of the other...?

In truth, although Paul's instruction regarding the thought-patterns of a Christ-like life is a topic worth exploring for many reasons, here we see that this instruction is incredibly practical and

pertinent to Paul's address to Euodia and Syntyche – and all of us as we wrestle in strained relationships...

Truth is, **all of Paul's** instructions here are **to this end** – as vital, necessary and practical steps toward pursuing and experiencing unity in the church (*and with anyone, for that matter...*).

And so let me frame it this way – cause I think this is what Paul is doing: **interpersonal problems require personal solutions...** or rather, **personal work...** And that's what Paul is laying out here in this list of seemingly unconnected instructions – in v.4-9...

Now, as you can tell, we don't have time to delve **thoroughly** into each instruction or command...

So, let me just say **a word** about each and then conclude with the part we easily miss, but that makes it all possible...

So, first, **v.4** – "**Rejoice in the Lord always.** *I will say it again: Rejoice.*"

This is Paul's constant refrain in this letter – so often misconstrued as simply an exhortation to smile or be joyful, when the **true emphasis** – repeated again and again in this letter – is that our joy is to be **in the Lord**.

Which can sound like such an empty religious slogan. But, the truth is, *we all rejoice in something. We all delight in something.* And what we rejoice in we pursue...

And in times of relational fracture, what are we prone to rejoice in, but the downfall of the other? Their humiliation? Their rejection by others? Their exposure and groveling? And our *own* vindication and praise?

Which only further alienates **us** from them – possibly, making us more of an adversary than we were before...

And Paul says – to Euodia and Syntyche – and to us – "**Rejoice in the Lord!**"! In other words, choose to delight in what God delights in and wants most to see happen... Choose to delight in what God is **able** to do... "**Rejoice in the Lord.**"

He goes on, "**Let your gentleness** be evident to all."

Here again, Paul's command is strikingly relevant to Euodia and Syntyche's situation – and us in similar situations.

Again, we all want **others** to be gentle and forbearing with us, but we are not always that good, or even **eager** to be gentle and forbearing with others. Especially those with whom we are at odds.

Honestly, *do we even desire to be gentle and forbearing toward certain people?*

And yet, what could be more important in experiences of relational breakdown? What could be more valuable to grow in and demonstrate than **gentleness and forbearance** for **all**, which obviously includes the person we are at odds with...

In truth, this is how God in Christ is toward us – **all the time.**

Which means that this is part of what it means to rejoice **in the Lord...**

To be toward others as God is toward us...

"Let your gentleness be evident to all."

v.6 - *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."*

This is probably the verse that gets the most attention in this whole text – coupled with the promise that follows it:

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus..."

Let's be honest, we all love this verse and also find it incredibly frustrating, at times... In it's undeniable **simplicity...**

As we all know, anxiety is no simple matter. It is a confusing and difficult battle.

But that's where Paul's instruction and command here forces us to pay attention to and **grab hold of** the grace that Paul declares here – the grace that makes all of this actually possible.

And it first shows up in this simple sentence at the end of **v.5** – which precedes Paul's words about anxiety – **"The Lord is near."**

This is the grace – the reality – the good news – that transforms all of these incredibly difficult commands (particularly in times of relational breakdown) into **grace-invitations.**

For as we seek to walk in the pursuit of peace, we are not simply stepping out alone. No. **The Lord is near...** The Lord who is already seeking us and seeking the other – and seeking peace...

How much of our anxiety is grounded in a quiet or screaming fear that things are out of control, or it's all going off the rails, or beyond anyone's capacity to handle?

I read somewhere that anxious thoughts are like **false prophets** – telling us a lie that God is indifferent, impotent and nowhere to be found, anyways...

But here Paul tells Euodia and Syntyche – and us... Not only do we live with hope for a day when our Saviour will **come** from heaven to restore and transform us and all that is in Christ (as Paul talked about in the previous text) – but **the Lord is near!** He is with us now – present – active – at work – seeking peace – seeking to reconcile broken relationships. Including ours...

This is why we don't have to be anxious and why we can pray with hope and thanksgiving – because **the God of peace** – **the God who reconciles things** – **the peace-making, shalom-seeking God is with us** and **at work** – **guarding our hearts** and our minds as we *rely on Him and follow Him...* Guarding our hearts and minds from ways of thinking and being that only increase our relationship divides...

Oh, I love Paul's letters. Too often we think of Paul as this heady and inaccessible theologian and his letters as much the same. But here and elsewhere we find Paul to be both the wise guide and practical mentor that we need, as well as a voice of gospel-perspective, gospel-hope that we need.

Which leads us well to the final instruction of this passage – v.9.

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you..."

One commentary points out the surprising impact of this simple word "**and**" – which comes before both statements about the presence of God's peace...

(v.7) "**And the peace** of God..."

(v.9) "**And the God of peace**..."

In this simple word – "**and**" – Paul invites us to not just expect God's presence, but to actually **follow Jesus – the Lord who is near** – not just to study it or say amen to it or read another book about it – but to actually following Jesus – the Lord who is near – in trust that along this path we will find God **at work with us**... leading and guarding and empowering us to seek peace and be united in Christ...

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus...

"And the God of peace will be with you..."

As we follow the Lord who is near... who is already seeking peace...