

# Philippians #8 - Gently does it

## Bible Reading

*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.*

Philippians 4:4-7

In the previous message, Paul encouraged the Philippian believers to learn from the lives of mature, faithful Christians, imitating the way that they embody Jesus' teaching, depending on his love and strength to live positive, godly lives.

We saw the importance of mature Christians being good examples to younger believers, living lives that show a deep relationship with Jesus.

Seeing people live in this kind of relationship encourages people to become more honest, loving and forgiving people, not because they ought to be, but because they want to be.

And we concluded with Paul reminding us that there is a goal to our Christian lives. There will be a day when we will enjoy a perfect, unending relationship with God.

This side of the resurrection however, life will not be perfect, and straight after those encouraging words, 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.*

Philippians 4:2-3

First, let's see the positive in this. There are people who say that Paul is anti-women. These people have not read their Bibles properly.

The Philippian church was initiated and hosted by a business woman called Lydia, and Paul writes that Euodia and Syntyche have 'contended at his side in the cause of the gospel' as two of his 'co-workers'.

But it would seem that although Euodia and Syntyche were hard working, Jesus-loving members of the Philippian church, they weren't on the best of terms with one another.

We all know this happens. And it can be the tiniest thing that sets it off.

There are people who can be flat out rude to you, and for some reason it doesn't bother you.

There are others who only have to raise an eyebrow a couple of millimetres, and you're contemplating punching them in the face.

We're not told what Euodia and Syntyche had fallen out over. But we are given good advice on how to deal with disagreements within the church.

What Paul doesn't say is, 'tell them girls to shut up'.

Paul mentions the women by name, this is in itself a sign of respect.

Then he asks 'you, my true companion, help these women'

Paul doesn't mention the name of this 'true companion'. It could be Epaphroditus, the man who delivered the letter to the Philippians, or maybe he is addressing the whole church as his 'true companion'.

What we do know is that Paul is not asking for these women to be rebuked or disciplined.

Paul's aim is to *help* these women.

Both of them are working hard to proclaim the gospel, and they are doing it as part of a team. The problem is that they each wish that the other one wasn't a member of that team!

Church is like a family, we don't always get to choose who is included.

Paul's solution is the same one he has been advocating throughout the letter, 'to be of the same mind in the Lord'.

He wants Euodia and Syntyche to adopt the Jesus-imitating mindset he explained earlier in the letter, being willing to give way to others. To not demand to have the last word.

Now this does not mean that they have to be 'best buddies'. I think it is guilt-inducing and impractical to think that all Christians should be equally good friends with every other Christian.

In life there will be people we naturally 'get on with' better than others.

When he told his followers to 'love one another' he was saying that we should think, wish and do our best for our fellow believers, not that we have to like each one of them equally.

And getting back to today's verses, Paul is pleading with Euodia and pleading with Syntyche (notice that he is not saying that either one of them is more to blame) to turn their attentions away from their squabbles, and to concentrate on who Jesus wants them to be.

And he wants the rest of the Philippian church to be part of this process.

All too often a petty squabble between two church members becomes something that polarises the whole church, with one group taking the side of one person, and another group siding with the other person.

Along with lying, distraction is one of Satan's most effective weapons. Moving our focus from Jesus to other people. From love to hate. From relationship to rejection.

If we adopt the mindset of Jesus, the mindset of putting God first, others second and ourselves last, we will become better at refusing to be dragged into these arguments, better equipped to put personal differences into perspective.

Which brings us to today's reading...

*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.*

Philippians 4:4-7

In a previous talk we saw how Paul saw rejoicing as being a ‘safeguard’.

I used the illustration of how police motorcyclists are taught to look away from obstacles, rather than at them, which encourages them to steer away from the obstacle rather than toward it.

And how rejoicing in the Lord has a similar effect on our spiritual lives.

Rejoicing in the Lord turns our eyes away from the problem, our own personal interests and grudges (yes, I’m looking at you Euodia and Syntyche!), and toward the solution, adopting the Jesus mindset.

But what does that mindset look like in the way we live our lives?

Well, I’m glad you asked!

Along with rejoicing in God’s love for us, living a life that exhibits the joy of being forgiven by him and living in relationship with him, Paul tells us that it looks a lot like gentleness.

And couldn’t the world do with more gentleness?

Couldn’t social media do with more gentleness?

Couldn’t politics do with more gentleness?

Couldn’t each one of us do with more gentleness?

The Jesus mindset is gentle. During his earthly ministry, Jesus’ gentleness was evident to all. He cared for the people he met. He listened to them. He healed them. he encouraged them.

The word Paul uses for gentleness carries the meaning of fairness and graciousness, not insisting on using rules and regulations to get your own way, being prepared to waive your rights if it will help others.

It is putting others before yourself... a theme that Paul regularly returns to in this letter.

And that is Jesus-shaped gentleness.

And it is this gentleness that should be evident in our lives.

When Jesus got angry with the religious authorities, it wasn't because they weren't being zealous about keeping God's laws, they were *extremely* zealous about keeping them.

It was because they often lost sight of what the laws were there for.

God's laws were put in place to help his people draw close to him, and to protect them from harming themselves.

And as followers and imitators of Jesus, we are to be people who encourage others to draw close to God, people who protect others from harm, even when we don't 'legally' have to, even when it costs us our comfort, and maybe our reputation and status.

Doesn't that sound a lot like Jesus?

And so Paul moves on...

*The Lord is near.*

Philippians 4:5b

The phrase 'The Lord is near' is ambiguous. It could mean 'The Lord could return at any time', or it could be quoting from Old Testament passages like Psalm 145...

*The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfils the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.*

Psalm 145:18-19

Paul enjoyed playing with words, so it is possible that both meanings are intended, and both meanings fit well with the words that follow.

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

Philippians 4:5-6

Paul moves from encouraging us to rejoice in the Lord and to exhibiting his gentleness in our lives, to telling us not to be anxious.

Anxiety is something that most of us experience.

A quick search on Amazon will reveal hundreds of publications that claim to help you overcome it.

But despite all these books, and the fact that the modern western world is richer, healthier and better educated than any previous civilisation in history, its young people have been dubbed ‘The anxious generation’.

Compared to many of us, the members of the Philippian church had a lot to be genuinely anxious about. There was no NHS, social security or state pension.

Many of them were slaves, which meant they had no rights at all. And being a Christian didn’t make them popular with the Roman authorities, or with many of their neighbours.

So, given they have every reason to be anxious, what is Paul recommending they do?

Paul once again encourages the Philippians to stop focussing on the obstacles, and to look to the one who can help them deal with them.

*...but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Philippians 4:6b

For Christians, this is to be our mindset, our way of life.

And why do we do this?

- We do it because God is good.
  - We do it because God loves us.
  - We do it because we believe that God’s way is the best way.
- and the result of trusting in God is...
- That we will always have plenty of money?
  - That we will never get ill?
  - That we will always be well thought of by those around us?

No. It is much better than that...

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

Philippians 4:7

If any civilisation has proved that money, education and health don’t guarantee happiness, it is the one we are living in today.

In contrast, the testimony of billions of Christians down the ages is that living in relationship with Jesus provides us with something that money, education and health can’t.

Peace.

A peace that ‘transcends all understanding’, a peace that comes from knowing you are loved and held by the creator of the universe.

As Jesus promised his scared and confused followers shortly before he was crucified...

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

John 14:27

And how do we achieve and maintain this peace?

*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.*

Philippians 4:8-9

We think about...

Whatever is true... the gospel message, God's constant love for us, which helps us to ignore the lies the devil feeds us, and to avoid telling the lies that make ourselves look better, and others worse

Whatever is noble... people who have done good things when they did not have to do good things... people who have gone above and beyond what they were expected to do... people who inspire us not to do the least we can get away with, but to work at being the best people we can be.

Whatever is right... correct attitudes, positive thinking, helping people who are helpless, rather than things we know are average at best, attitudes that are questionable, lives that are selfish and self-centred.

Whatever is pure... praying for others, spending time with friends, reading God's word... not wasting your time on shabby things, half-truths and dubious internet memes.

Whatever is lovely... learning to appreciate the beauty of nature, or art, or music.

and so on... whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent, whatever is praiseworthy... think about such things.

And Paul is confident that as the Philippian believers are thinking over these verses, they will be thinking of the things they have learned, received and heard him say.

And more than that, they will have seen them embodied in Paul. These are not abstract concepts, they are a way of life. The things we really believe will be reflected in the way we live our lives.

As Jesus takes hold of us, and we choose to hold on to him, we press on to what he calls us to do.

And as we do this, whatever our life circumstances, whether in a first century Roman prison, or a house in Northolt, the God of peace will be with you.

Why not claim that for yourself this week? Jesus promised it, why not put him to the test?

Like Eudodia and Syntyche, you might hear the Spirit telling you that it will require some life changes. That's the Jesus way.

Like Paul, you might find yourself wondering why Jesus doesn't change your circumstances. That's the Jesus way.

Like me, you might find yourself wondering if you are a religious nutter talking to the ceiling. That's the Jesus way.

But, ultimately it doesn't rely on us being certain.

In fact not being certain can be an advantage, it makes us hold on to Jesus even tighter as we choose to rely on his strength, his love, his gentleness. As we ask him what he wants us to do, and ask him to help us to be willing to do it.

This is not a positive-thinking trick.

This is not play-acting.

This is what living faithfully means. This is the Jesus way.

And he is faithful. And he loves you. And he will never let you go.

Amen.