

(Sermon 20)
A Peace That Passes All Understanding
Philippians 4:4-7

Lord's Day, 6/11/17 * Christ Reformed Community Church * St. Johns, FL

Intro

- We've been speaking about *joy in the power of Christian living* as we move into chapter 4. Last week we saw that joy for the power of Christian living will be found when the church maintains unity. A strong, unified church results in spiritual stability. And spiritual stability results in power to live a godly and fruitful life.

- Beginning in v4, Paul moves on to a different area where he tells us that power to live the Christian life well will be found in the experience of a peace that passes all understanding. Notice what he says in vss 4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

William Gladstone served as the Prime Minister of England in the 1800's. He was once asked what kept him so serene and composed in the midst of his busy life. He said that at the foot of his bed able to be viewed both as he laid down to sleep at night and as he got up in the morning, were the familiar words from Is 26:3, "*Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.*"ⁱⁱ

- What is the secret to experiencing peace in the life of a Christian? How can peace be found in the midst of death, trials, heartache, sickness, temptations, and the host of worldly sorrows that come as a result of the fall? For the unbeliever peace only comes when they make peace with God through faith in Christ as Savior (cf. Rom 5:1). But Paul is writing to the church (believers) in Philippians 4 and his promise of experiencing peace is for the one who is already a Christian. Notice v7 with me again:

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

- To be sure, this is a promise by God. But how does the Christian receive this promise of peace; a peace that passes all understanding?

Proposition: In Philippians 4:4-7, Paul explains how Christians can experience a peace in life that passes all understanding. His explanation has 2 *key points*. First, he describes the *pursuit of peace*. Second, he describes the *promise of peace*. Such a passage encourages all believers to pursue peace the only way God promises it can be experienced.

Trans: First Paul speaks about...

I. The Pursuit of Peace (4-6)

- The pursuit of peace involves three Christian qualities. The first one is an inward quality, the second an outward, and the third an upward.

Trans: Notice with me first that the pursuit of peace involves an...

A. Inward Joyfulness, 4

- *Inward joyfulness* is the first Christian quality to cultivate in order to experience peace. Notice Paul's words again in v4: **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.**

- Joy is the theme of this letter. We saw it in chapter one where Paul says he always prays with joy because of the Philippians partnership with him in the gospel (1:4-5). Joy was mentioned in chapter two where Paul said he would rejoice in being poured out as a sacrificial drink offering for the Philippians (2:17-18). And again in chapter three he tells the Philippians to rejoice (3:1). And so it should be no surprise that he mentions it yet again here in chapter 4.

- And here in v4 Paul emphasizes the importance of joy by telling the church twice in one verse to **Rejoice...again I will say, Rejoice.** But he also tells us that we are to have ongoing joy by using the word **always**. And on top of that his words

are a command. The word **Rejoice** is a present imperative verb meaning it's a command requiring a habitual rejoicing on the part of the Christian.

- If we are awake and human this morning this should surely strike us as odd, perhaps even impossible. How can Paul command all Christians everywhere regardless of their circumstances to always rejoice? We live in a feelings based culture that seems to think love can't be commanded because it's based on how one feels. Love just happens. We "fall" in love, for instance. Similarly, one may argue that joy is based on feelings or circumstances. But such an argument can only be made in a post-sin universe. Sin makes us think that joy is based on how we feel at the moment. Joy, we tell ourselves, only comes when we feel happy or joyful.

- But Scripture is clear that joy is not based on feelings, but on facts. Notice again Paul's words in v4. He says: **Rejoice in the Lord**. The Philippians certainly could not rejoice in the feelings that came about through the conflict between Eudias and Syntyche (2-3), nor the looming prospect of false teachers entering their church (chapter 3), nor the reality of their beloved Apostle's imprisonment. And this is not even too mention the whole gamut of personal trials each member of this church faced at their jobs and in their families lives. For

Paul's part, he makes this comment under intense persecution imprisoned for the gospel and with his life on the line. And yet, he is still able to encourage other Christians to rejoice with Him because of the Lord!

- The truth is, regardless of circumstances, believers have the power to **rejoice** because of their union with Christ- their oneness *in the Lord*. Their faith in the Lord provides all Christians the opportunity to **rejoice**. Joy is even mentioned as a fruit of the Spirit's work of regeneration (Gal 5:22).

- To the degree that we grasp the truth that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ will be to the degree that we have joy even in the midst of suffering. In fact, Paul mentioned exactly this right at the beginning of explaining the great doctrine of justification. Turn with me to Romans 5:1-5. Here Paul says:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

- You are commanded to have joy as a Christian because you are the only type of person that can actually have joy. Joy is found in Jesus. Later in Philippians 4, Paul will remark in v19,

“And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

- Jesus Himself promises His disciples in Matt 6:

Why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all His glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (28-33).

- The fact that the mere reading of Jesus’ words is comforting is a reminder to us of just how complicated we often make the process of experiencing peace. Peace can never come to us so long as we are focused on our trials, circumstances, and worldly sorrows. Peace only begins to come as we focus on Jesus. We are called as v4 says to **Rejoice in the Lord!**

Trans: But Paul’s larger point in the context is that learning to rejoice in Jesus and His glorious salvation is but only the first quality to cultivate in your pursuit of peace. There is a 2nd quality we are to pursue found in v5. The pursuit of peace involves inward joyfulness, but also...

B. Outward Graciousness, 5

- *Outward graciousness* is the second Christian quality to cultivate in order to experience peace. This may seem unrelated to inward joyfulness and the larger theme of pursuing peace, but it's not. Our union with Christ (i.e. being in the Lord) has huge ramifications for interaction with others in the body of Christ. Our union with Christ in one body means we are also in union with one another. Notice v5 closely. Paul says: **Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.**

- The word-translated **reasonableness** in the ESV is a very rich Greek word. So rich, in fact, that there isn't one English word that captures what it means. Commentators and Bible versions render it in a host of ways including, but not limited to: big-heartedness, forbearance, yieldedness, kindness, gentleness, sweet reasonableness, considerateness, charitableness and generosity. So this Greek word (ἐπιεικὲς) is difficult to capture with just one English word. Perhaps the best word to use would be *graciousness*. Paul is speaking about a gentle, gracious, and reasonable spirit toward others in the church.

- If your having trouble seeing the connection between Paul's call for inward joyfulness in v4 with his call for outward

graciousness toward others in v5, then consider Sinclair Ferguson's explanation who says:

This command seems unrelated to the exhortation to rejoice; but there is a connection. The people who are joyful are those who have been delivered from an obsession with themselves and their immediate circumstances. But that is also a prerequisite to being reasonable. The joyless person can never be a gentle person.ⁱⁱ

- In other words, someone who is concerned about their rights, status, reputation, and perceived needs is not going to be thoughtful toward others. They are going to fight for self, which inevitably will result in conflict with others. Paul is calling for the opposite of a contentious and self-seeking spirit.

- Paul's words likely echo back to the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. Why were these women ultimately not getting along? Because they were putting their desires and wants above others. They were not demonstrating outward graciousness and consideration of others within the body.

- When Paul chided the Corinthians for suing one another in court, he rhetorically asked, "*Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? (I Cor 6:7)*. He was calling the Corinthians to the same thing he was calling the Philippians to here, which is the same thing he is calling us to today. It's a willingness to yield to others in the church when possible so long as it does not violate any Biblical principle.ⁱⁱⁱ And the

truth is that this principle extends to any relationship be it with your spouse, your children, your friends, neighbors, co-workers, and even unbelievers in the world. Otherwise, you would not get along with anybody. The result of such a life is that there is no peace.

- Isn't it true that people often bring a heap of trouble on themselves when they demand their so called rights? They make a mountain out of a mole hill and all of the sudden there is tension in a relationship often followed by outright destruction of a relationship.

- I want to return to those questions posed by Paul in I Cor 6:7: *Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?* Well, notice why in the rest of v5. Paul gives the reason for why we should demonstrate outward graciousness to others. **The Lord is at hand.**

- Commentators differ on what Paul means by this. Some say he is referring to the second coming of the Lord Jesus. Others say it's a reference to God being near to His people when they have troubled spirits and are being mistreated, for instance, by others. The NASB translates it as *The Lord is near.*

- But there is a sense in which both interpretations can be correct. Christ's 2nd coming is certainly near, or **at hand** no matter how you look at it. Nobody knows the day or hour (Mt 24:36), but the apostles themselves certainly saw Christ's return as possible in their lifetimes and lived in light of such an event. If the Lord comes before the believer dies, then it can certainly be said that His return was **at hand**. But it's equally true that for believers who die and enter the presence of the Lord the Bible says their time on earth is like a vapor (James 4:14) or a mere breath (Ps 39:5), and further after they die their reckoning of time in Christ's presence during the intermediate state before His return is referred to as "a little season" (Rev 6:11). Therefore, even for saints who have died a thousand years ago who are in the presence of God lived a life akin to a vapor and it won't be long in their experience of time when the Lord returns so that his return is **at hand**, or near. We live in the last days with the sending of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The return of Christ is the great event we wait for when God's work of salvation will be complete. That day is **at hand**.

- But there is also the sense that **the Lord is at hand**, or "*near to the broken-hearted*" as Ps 34:18 affirms. So that either interpretation bears the same basic truth: the Lord will ultimately vindicate His people. Christ is the ultimate Judge of

people's thoughts, motives, and actions. We can be sure that He will repay accordingly. He sees all. He knows all. We wait for His coming when He makes all wrong right. This is why Paul said what he did in Romans 12:14-19. Turn there with me. Notice it says:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

- The experience of peace in life is not achieved by fighting for our selfish rights and then taking justice into our own hands when things don't go our way. This is not a living a life of faith. What's not done in faith cannot please God. For without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6).

Trans: I think it's somewhat clear so far that our pursuit of peace really isn't that hard. It requires an *inward joyfulness* that comes from God's sovereign and saving goodness in Christ. It comes from *outward graciousness* demonstrated to others as we yield to them and trusting in God to vindicate us someday for living honorably before Him. But there are 3 qualities that are to be pursued in order to experience peace. The first is inward. The second is outward, but the third is upward.

C. Upward Prayerfulness, 6

- *Upward Prayerfulness* is the third Christian quality to cultivate in order to experience peace. It sounds so simple, but the Christian way to avoid worry and anxiety is to pray. Notice what Paul says in v6: **do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**

- Paul says pretty emphatically, **Do not be anxious about anything.** Since God is sovereign over all things, His people are not to be worried about any one thing. A low view of God leads to big worry. A high view of God leads to little worry.

- Steve Lawson points out that the English word *worry* is derived from an older English word meaning “to strangle”. He says:

This is a good image, because stress chokes our inner life, robbing us of peace. Worry squeezes the life out of the heart, strangling all enjoyment of life. To be anxious is to be a worrier, to be fearful and distressed; and such anxiety compromises our faith in the sovereign purposes of God. And in that way, anxiety robs us of our joy.^{iv}

- Worry is a focus on struggles instead of the Sovereign. Worry is a preoccupation with concerns of self instead of the care of God. Worry is a failure to trust God’s promises. Just as we were commanded to have joy in v4, here we are commanded not to worry.

- Well, what's the cure for our concerns (worrying)? The antidote for our anxiety? Paul answers in the second half of v6 that the prescription is prayer. He says, **do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**

- The believer is not to worry about **anything** and to pray about **everything**. We are to “*cast[ing] all our anxieties on Him, because He cares for you*” (I Pet 5:7).

-Three synonyms are used here to describe prayer. It's called **prayer, supplication, and requests.**

- So we are to bring our problems to God. But notice Paul says we are to do this **with thanksgiving**. That's another way of saying that we are not to present our problems before God as if He can't solve them. We aren't to lay our troubles before Him as if He can't fix them. We aren't to communicate our brokenness to Him as if He can't repair it. We are to come with a thankful spirit knowing that He causes all things to work together for good (cf. Rom 8:28) because His sovereign purposes are at work constantly in our lives. We are to thank Him for this and confidently ask Him to intercede according to His will.

- We are to detail our burdens to God, thanking Him for who He is and what He has done in our lives so far and what He will do. To “give thanks” is shorthand for prayer according to Paul in 2 Cor 11:1. Thanksgiving is a vital element of prayer. The one who eats gives thanks to the Lord (Rom 14:6). In Eph 5:20 he says we are to “*give[ing] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*”. In Col 4:2 he says, “*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving*”.

- Prayer without **thanksgiving** is like a bird without wings and will not rise to heaven.^v But when we pray with thanksgiving, we can be assured God hears us.

As the Psalmist says:

But I call to God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and He hears my voice. He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. God will give ear and humble them, He who is enthroned from of old (Ps 55:16-19).

- Thankful prayers relieve anxiety because they affirm God’s sovereign control over all things. This is why it brings peace. But the promise of peace only comes after the pursuit of peace.

- The Heidelberg Catechism nicely instructs us on the nature of prayer as humbling calling out to God to meet our needs while also thanking Him by recognizing His ability to do so.

Q & A 116

Q. Why do Christians need to pray?

A. Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us.¹ And also because God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking God for them.

Q & A 117

Q. What is the kind of prayer that pleases God and that he listens to?

A. First, we must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, revealed to us in his Word, asking for everything God has commanded us to ask for.

Second, we must fully recognize our need and misery, so that we humble ourselves in God's majestic presence.

Third, we must rest on this unshakable foundation: even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer because of Christ our Lord. That is what God promised us in his Word.

Q & A 118

Q. What did God command us to pray for?

A. Everything we need, spiritually and physically, as embraced in the prayer Christ our Lord himself taught us.

Trans: Such pursuit of peace by the Christian involves the cultivation and demonstration of three Christian qualities: *inward joyfulness, outward graciousness, and upward prayerfulness*. When we pursue peace this way we experience the profit of peace. So we move from the *pursuit of peace* (vss 4-6) to the *promise of peace* (7).

II. The Promise of Peace (7)

- The word **And** at the beginning of v7 indicates that v7 is the result of fulfilling the three Christian qualities in vss 4-6. The promise of a peace is highlighted in two ways in v7.

Trans: First, the promise of peace is...

A. Sovereignly Given, 7a

- Lest we think on the one hand that God owes peace to us, or on the other hand that our circumstances can get so bad that they overwhelm the possibility of peace, Paul tells us at the beginning of v7 that this is God's peace to sovereignly give. This reminds us that nobody can thwart the gift of peace He promises to His children. Notice he calls it the peace of God in the beginning of v7. **And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.** Its called the **peace of God** because it comes from the "*God of peace*" (*Rom 15:33*).

- Since peace originates with God and it's His to give. Isaiah 26:3 says:

You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting God.

- Peace is a reward sovereignly given to those who cultivate and demonstrate those three Christian qualities of inward joyfulness, outward graciousness, and upward prayerfulness.

This has always been the way God has operated. Aaron, the high priest of Israel declared, “*The Lord will bless His people with peace*” (Is 29:11). Jesus repeated this promise in John 14:27:

Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.

- Since it's a peace sovereignly given by God, the experience of it is unexplainable. Notice Paul says it's a peace that **surpasses all understanding**. This means that even believers (much less unbelievers who can't experience such peace) can't measure it's height and depth and length and breadth. It's unfathomable, unexplainable, and incomprehensible. Another way of putting that is to say that it is supernatural.

- The peace Christians experience is just one of the many gifts of a gracious God. As Paul exclaimed at the end of Romans 11:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways (v33)!

- Peace for the Christian is inner tranquility of soul when there is a raging storm on the outside of your life. Prayer doesn't always change circumstances, but it changes the attitude of our hearts such that we embrace a peace that is incomprehensible. Ask it to be explained, it can't be (it's supernatural). Demand it from God, it won't be given. He

promises it to those who pursue peace according to the three Christian qualities in vs 4-6.

Trans: But the promise of peace is seen not only in the fact that it is a reward *sovereignly given*, but also because it's *sovereignly guarded*. Notice the rest of v7.

B. Sovereignly Guarded, 7b

- Paul says the peace of God is a peace that **will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**. He must sovereignly give it, but once he does it **will guard** our **hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**.

- The word translated as **guard** is a military word speaking of soldiers on guard duty. Paul himself was being guarded by soldiers of the praetorian guard, the most elite soldiers in the Roman Empire. However, Paul had a peace even in the midst of prison because he was guarded by someone far greater. We too have available to us a peace sovereignly given and guarded by God given only to those **in Christ Jesus**.

- Of course, v7 cannot be divorced from v6 on prayer. It's only the praying man or woman of God that experiences the given and guarded peace of God.

King David was a man fraught with many troubles and trials. He was not immune to getting so lost in his trials that he forgot to pray to and trust in God. Therefore, there were times
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he didn't experience the peace of God. Seeking refuge from Saul's hot pursuit of him, David went to the Philistine city of Gath. But some of the Philistines (enemies of God's people) recognized him and told their king (Achish), *"Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands'"* (I Sam 21:11). Knowing that his identity had been found out, David resorted to panic by disguising himself as insane before the Philistines *"and acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the walls of the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard"* (I Sam 21:13). This resulted in the king Achish telling his servants, *"Behold, you see the man behaving as a madman. Why do you bring him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence? Shall this one come into my house?"* (I Sam 21:14-15). So David escaped safely to the cave of Adullman (I Sam 22:1). And there in that cave he wrote a prayer recorded for us in Ps 57. The prayer makes it clear that David realizes back in the city he should have prayed instead of panicked. But because he panicked instead of prayed, he ended up resorting to fake insanity and embarrassed himself before others. And here in this prayer he affirmed the truths that he forgot. He said:

Be gracious to me, O God, be gracious to me, for my soul takes refuge in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge until destruction passes by. I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me. He will send from heaven and save me; He reproaches him who tramples upon me. Selah. God will send forth His lovingkindness and His truth" (Ps 57:1-3).

And later in that prayer after affirming God's sovereignty at the beginning, David prayed, *"My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises"* (v7).

- The reality is that peace is always the result of prayer that affirms God's goodness and sovereignty. The result is a peace

that **surpasses all understanding** that **guard(s) [our] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

Con

- Peace is promised to us by God as believers. But it only comes to us when we pursue it. The pursuit of peace involves cultivating three Christian qualities. First, we must possess an *inward joyfulness* that comes as we focus on the gospel and appreciate it. Second we must demonstrate an *outward graciousness* toward others yielding to them when necessary and trusting God as the final Judge. And finally, we must also cultivate an *upward prayerfulness*; a posture of constant prayer in thanksgiving casting our burdens on God. This is the pursuit of peace. And the pursuit of peace results in the promise of peace. God sovereignly gives peace and then sovereignly guards it.

- What are your worries today? Have you cast your burdens to God? Have you taken it to the Lord in prayer? To be sure, you can take your anxiety to Him and He can handle it. To be sure, the God of all peace grants peace to all in and through Jesus Christ. Peace only comes in Christ. And peace always comes in Christ.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.^{vi}

ⁱ Ron Prosis, *Preaching Illustrations from Church History*, 152.

ⁱⁱ Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians*, 103.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hendriksen, 193.

^{iv} Lawson, *Philippians for You*, 194.

^v Hendriksen, 196.

^{vi} William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* (D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 112-113)