

“Living Like the Lord is at Hand”
Philippians 4:4-7
July 5, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in our series in the Book of Philippians, and we come today to Philippians 4:4-7.

As we hear the passage, please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, let your steadfast love be upon us,
according to your promise,
for we know that our hope is in your word to us.
Help us to walk in your ways in all areas of life,
and to delight in your testimony to us.
Grant this now as we turn to your word together,
and all the days of our lives.
For we ask it in Jesus name, Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:41,43-47]

Introduction

Our text this morning can seem like just a list of exhortations as Paul nears the end of his letter to the Philippians. But actually, I think there is a logic to the statements Paul makes here. [Fee, 403 n.16]

What I think we see in this text is that: While we may struggle with Paul's commands here, because the Lord is close to us, we should pray and celebrate, in ways that produce peace and gentleness in us.

Let me say that again: While we may struggle with Paul's commands here, because the Lord is close to us, we should pray and celebrate, in ways that produce peace and gentleness in us.

Let's break that down together.

We Struggle with the Things Paul Lists Here

The first thing for us to acknowledge is that we struggle with the exhortations Paul gives us here. And that, in a first reading, can be discouraging.

Take a look at our text. In verse 4, Paul writes: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

Some of you, I expect, are really good at rejoicing – at feeling joy and expressing joyfulness, maybe in general, and maybe especially in the things God has done for you. It just seems to come naturally to you. And if that's you, that's wonderful.

But some of us struggle with that.

We're not very good at rejoicing.

I've shared this story with some of you, but a few years ago, I had an older pastor in our presbytery pause in the middle of a conversation with me, look at me, and say "You're not really built for happiness ... are you?"

As I've mentioned before, I love the original Winnie the Pooh stories – the books by A. A. Milne.

And my favorite character, by far, is Eeyore. Eeyore just gets it. When I read Eeyore's lines, I feel seen.

I'm not great at rejoicing. And that can be a serious problem.

It can be a serious problem because it's not a particularly enjoyable way to live life.

But even more importantly, it's a serious problem because it means I'm not very good at following Paul's command for me here.

And maybe you're like that too.

Some of us are not very good at rejoicing.

But Paul doesn't stop at calling us to rejoice. He continues. In verse 5 he says: "Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

Paul calls us to gentleness. And that too is something that so many of us struggle with.

When other people frustrate us, or disappoint us, whether it's in our family or in the workplace, or in the church or in some other setting, we can respond with harshness and impatience. Even if, as "good Christians," we make sure not to raise our voice or say any PG-13 or R-rated words, even so, we can speak and act towards others in ways that are meant to cut. In ways that are meant to cause pain – not to be gentle.

In those moments, we are not motivated by what's best for the other person, or even what's most effective for resolving the situation, in those moments we are driven by impatience or anger.

And in those situations many of us are not as Paul exhorts us to be – known for our gentleness.

We struggle to rejoice. We struggle to be gentle.

And still Paul's not done.

In verse six, Paul writes: "Do not be anxious about anything."

And here, some of us can feel crushed. Because we worry all the time. We are filled with anxiety. We are concerned for all that could go wrong. It keeps us up at night, or it wakes us early in the morning. It fills our lives with frantic action, or it paralyzes us so we cannot act. Some of us struggle with a combination of sinful worry as well as anxiety-related mental health struggles. For others, it's just the sinful worry at work. But whether our struggles are augmented by mental or biological factors or not, we all are prone to sinful forms of worry, which Paul here calls us to be free from.

We struggle to rejoice. We struggle to be gentle. We struggle to set aside our worry.

Finally, in verse six Paul calls us to pray. And many of us know that we're not very good at this either. We do not pray as we should.

And so, when it comes to rejoicing, when it comes to gentleness, when it comes to worry, when it comes to prayer – we struggle with these things.

And so hearing a text like that seems to just list these things we're supposed to be doing, and we're not good at most or all of them – that can lead us to just feel guilt and discouragement.

But that's not Paul's intention. Paul's intention, instead, is to point us to an important truth that can lead us to these blessings – that can lead us to peace and prayer, to rejoicing and gentleness.

And that's good news. Because we need whatever Paul has to offer us here – we need whatever truth can bring us these blessings.

So where does Paul point us here?

The Lord Is Close to Us

Well, I think the foundation Paul gives us here – the thing that really changes what's possible – comes in the second half of verse 5.

There Paul writes: "The Lord is at hand."

Now, scholars debate the exact nature of Paul's meaning here [Fee, 407-408], but I think that one key point Paul is making is that even now, in this life, Jesus is near to all who call on him in faith.

This is a truth that the Psalms state regularly. "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth" says Psalm 145 [Fee, 407]. "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" says Psalm 34 [Ferguson, 103-104].

The Bible tells us, again and again, that the Lord is close to his people. Jesus, before ascending to heaven, said to his followers: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus is with his people – Jesus is near to us – he is "at hand." And this truth should change how we view our lives – that's the important truth at the heart of this text.

And this Jesus, who is so close to us, is also the King of the Universe. He is sovereign. He is in control. He is stronger than death, stronger than evil, stronger than any power of this world. He reigns over all things. And he is with us.

He also cares deeply about us. He came to earth, for us. He died on the cross for us. On the cross, he suffered the pains of hell that we deserved, all so that we might be saved. Jesus has proven his love for us. He is trustworthy. [Fee, 410-411]

And so, Jesus, who is sovereign over all, Jesus, who loves us enough to die for us – this Jesus is near to us at all times, if we call out to him in faith.

And knowing that, believing that, should change us.

Think of it like this: If the CEO of your company knew you, and cared deeply for you, and stayed in touch with you daily, it would change how you viewed your place in the company.

Or, if the governor of our state, or the president of our country knew you personally, and cared for you so much that he was willing to die for you, and he checked in on you daily to see how you were doing, that would deeply affect how you thought of your place in this state or in this country.

And so, if Jesus, the King of the Universe, cares for you so much that he's already died for you, and he watches over you, and he's is close to you every moment of every day, that too should radically change how you view your place in this world. That's the point at the heart of this passage, in verse 5.

The Lord is close to us.

That's the foundational theological truth Paul gives us in this text.

And then Paul tells us that because the Lord is close to us, we should pray and celebrate, in ways that produce peace and gentleness in us.

We Should Pray

First, because the Lord is close to us, Paul tells us that we should pray.

We see this in the second half of verse 6. Paul says, "In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

Think of the analogies we considered a moment ago. Imagine that the CEO of your company, or the governor of our state, or the president of our country cared deeply about you, loved you so much he would give his own life for you, and imagine he checked in on you every day, and he wanted you to tell him what he might do to help you, and make your life better.

If you really needed something, it would be kind of crazy not tell him. And it would be equally absurd not to express thanks for his concern for you.

And yet that is how we often respond to Jesus. We refuse to tell him our needs. And we neglect to thank him for his concern.

The Bible tells us that the King of the universe loves us deeply. And he watches over us all the time. And he wants us to tell him what we need. He wants us to let him know what kind of help we think we might need. He doesn't promise that he will answer every request with a "Yes." After all, from his position he often knows what will be best for us in the long run far better than we do. But he wants us to share our requests with him.

How absurd is it that we so often refuse to do that? How silly is it that we so often don't tell him what we need, or what we hope for from him? And how sad is it that we don't thank him for his care and concern for us?

There are many reasons we might neglect prayer in these ways. But one is that we forget that the Lord is at hand. We forget that Jesus is near. We forget that every moment of every day Jesus is ready to hear from us.

And so, one effect of really believing that Jesus is near is that we will speak to him more. We will pray to him more. We will, as Paul puts it, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [our] requests be made known to God.”

So knowing that Jesus is close to us, we should pray.

We Should Celebrate

But as we recognize that the Lord is close to us, Paul doesn’t just call us to pray. He also calls us to celebrate.

That’s what we see in verse four.

Paul writes: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Now when we hear the call to rejoice, we tend to filter it through the lens of expressive individualism. And so what we tend to hear is: “Spontaneously feel joy in your heart, and then, when you do, express that joy with words and actions.”

Now, that kind of rejoicing is a good thing. And that kind of joy, that comes spontaneously as we recognize the Lord’s nearness – that is a wonderful thing.

But even so, understanding Paul’s command in those terms above is still too narrow. It leaves other things out, and it runs the risk of shoving the concept of “rejoicing” into a modern, western box. Because in the ancient world, the idea of rejoicing was much broader than that.

One commentator actually translates verse four as “Celebrate joyfully in the Lord, all the time. I’ll say it again: celebrate!” In his comments he explains that the word, as Paul uses it, would have certainly contained the idea of spontaneous feelings that well up from within, but he notes that in Paul’s “world and culture this rejoicing would have meant (what we would call) public celebration.” [Wright, 130]

He goes on to explain that in the ancient world that Paul was writing in, cities would often organize great festivals, with food, and games, and shows, meant to celebrate their gods and their city. And that included the celebration of Caesar himself as a god. And so, this commentator argues, part of Paul’s point here is that if the pagans around them are celebrating their false gods and their pagan cities with such passion, shouldn’t Christians be celebrating their true God, and Jesus their true King, and the glory of his Kingdom, with even more gusto than the pagans around them? [Wright, 130]

Contained in Paul’s words in verse four is the idea that as Christians, we should be people of celebration.

And it seems like this could apply to our lives in many ways.

First, celebration should mark our gathered worship. Yes, so should repentance, and instruction, and contemplation of God's Word. But celebration should also be a key component. At the climax of our worship every Lord's Day morning is a symbolic meal that's meant to point us forward to a future feast. It's a meal that's meant to be celebratory. And it is the climax of our worship.

And that sense of celebration should extend to other aspects of our worship as well – to our prayers and especially to our songs. Singing, after all, is one way that human beings often celebrate together.

Our worship each Lord's Day should be a celebration!

But our celebration in the Lord should extend beyond Sunday gatherings, as I think verse 4 makes clear.

And here we need to acknowledge, that with the exception of Christmas, we're often much better at celebrating secular holidays, than we are at celebrating the truths of the gospel.

Of course it can be completely appropriate for us to join in the celebrations of our secular society around us, when they are rejoicing in good things. My point isn't that we should do that less. Rather, my point is that we should celebrate the works of God even more enthusiastically.

And so ... what if, as Christians, we celebrated Pentecost, and the founding of the Apostolic Church, with even greater festivities, and feasting, and fireworks than we have for 4th of July and the founding of our earthly nation? What if, as Christians, we celebrated Ascension Sunday with even more dedication than we celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day? What if we gathered for special food and fellowship for Epiphany with as much excitement as we do for the Super Bowl?

In the Old Testament, the calendar of God's people was filled with special feasts throughout the year, celebrating God's works, celebrating his blessings, celebrating his nearness. And on this side of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, surely we have even more reason to celebrate than they did ... don't we?

And celebration is not just an inward feeling that we give an outward expression to. In fact, often celebration can work from the outside in. The festivities and the joyful gatherings effect and shape our inward emotions. They focus us on what is good. They cause us to be more thankful. They teach us to rejoice. Such celebrations of God's people, gathered together, focused on the God's mighty works, and built on the conviction that the Lord is near to us – such celebrations are, in a sense, a means of grace to us. No matter how we are feeling, we can show up to a celebration. And often, we leave more joyful than when we arrived. Often the truths that we celebrate together become a bit more real to us as we celebrate them. Often such joyful communal celebrations can lead to more genuine rejoicing in our own hearts. [Fee, 404-405; Ferguson, 102]

But we don't need to gather with the entire church to make that happen.

We can celebrate God's goodness and God's nearness in our families as well. As a Christian family, do you celebrate the goodness and the nearness of God? If your kids or a member of your

family had to list the different aspects of Christian discipleship in your home, would celebration make that list? Is it a part of how you live your faith together?

And what about you personally? When the Lord blesses you, when he answers your prayers, when you receive from his goodness, do you stop and celebrate what the Lord has done? Or do you more often move on to the next thing – the next challenge, the next need?

As Christians we are to be people who are marked by celebration – by rejoicing. We are to “Celebrate joyfully in the Lord, all the time” – to “Rejoice in the Lord always” – Paul believes it so strongly that he says it twice.

And such celebrations can occur even in difficult circumstances. Remember how Paul’s ministry began in Philippi. Paul and Silas had been arrested, beaten, and then put in the inner prison of Philippi, with their feet in stocks. And then we read: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” [Acts 16:22-25; Fee, 405 n.23]

Paul and Silas may have prayed for deliverance. They may have lamented their sufferings in prayer. But they also rejoiced. And their rejoicing took the form of an external action – not just meditation and the mustering up of certain feelings inside. But they sang together. Through song they celebrated the nearness of the Lord. And their celebration in that place, helped lead to the establishment of the Philippian church.

Singing is a good way to celebrate. We can do it in all sorts of circumstances. And as Christians, we are supposed to be people who sing. Should you be singing more, in the Lord?

Because the Lord is near to us, we should pray, and we should celebrate. That’s what we see here.

But from there, Paul adds one more layer. Because as we said, Paul also tells us in these verses that we should pray and we should celebrate in such a way that it produces peace and gentleness in us.

This Should Produce Peace in Us

First, Paul makes it clear that the Lord’s closeness, and our subsequent prayer and celebration, should lead to peace within us.

“The Lord is at hand,” he says in verse five. And then in verse six he continues: “do not be anxious about anything.” Then he calls on them to pray, and then he assures them that as they do, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Anxiety was a common thing in the ancient world. The pagans understood themselves to be living in a world full of powerful forces that were largely indifferent to them. [Wright, 131]

And the modern world can often feel the same – full of impersonal forces: natural forces, economic forces, military forces, social forces, market forces, all of which are largely indifferent to us and our wellbeing. And anxiety is an understandable response to living in such a world.

But Paul reminds us here that that cannot be a complete view of our world. Because there is also a greater force at work. Because Jesus is King. He reigns over every power in this world. And he is not impersonal. He is not distant. He is close to us. He invites us to pray to him and make our needs known to him. He calls on us to celebrate his love and his reign. And knowing these truths, and acting on these truths, and rejoicing together in these truths, should calm our anxieties, and give us God's peace, Paul says.

Now ... that doesn't mean that our lives will be smooth or painless – they won't be. But we can face the rough patches and we can face the pain with peace. Because Jesus, who loves us so much, is in control. He is King. He is sovereign over everything. And if we call on him in faith, then he is with us – he is watching over every detail of our lives, and working all things together for our good. And so, though we may struggle, though we may be confounded, though we may suffer, even so, we need not fret. We can have a peace that surpasses our own understanding. Because Jesus is with us. And he can be trusted.

That should be one fruit in our lives as we believe in the Lord's nearness, and as we respond with prayer and celebration.

This Should Produce Gentleness in Us

But the final result that Paul mentions in these verses, as we pray and celebrate, trusting in the Lord's closeness, is that we should be gentle.

And this might be unexpected for us, but it's right there in the middle of all of this. In verse 5 Paul says "Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

As God's people, we are to be known by others for our gentleness. Gentleness is to flow out of our conviction that God is close to us, and our life of prayer and celebration. That's what Paul says here.

Now, a brief note on the translation here. This is the ESV's marginal translation. The translation they give in the main text is "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone." Now ... as an overly intellectual Presbyterian, that translation is much more attractive to me. But it also seems much less likely.

The word used there is translated as "gentle spirit" by the New American Standard Bible ... and as "gentleness" in both the New King James Version, and the New International Version. And in fact, every other time the same Greek root word occurs elsewhere in the New Testament, the ESV translates it as "gentle." [1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 3:2; James 3:17; 1 Peter 2:18]

Each of the commentaries I read, as well as the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament that I consulted all translated it as “gentleness” [Ferguson, 103; TDNT II.590], “gentle forbearance” [Fee, 403] or “gentle and gracious.” [Wright, 128]

And so, most interpreters I’ve come across understand Paul’s point here to be that our reputation with others should be for our gentleness.

Both individually, and as a community, we are a people who should be known for our gentleness – we should have a gentleness and graciousness that extends to and is known by all people. [Wright, 130; Ferguson, 103]

God cares about gentleness. It is, after all, one of the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5. [v.22-23]

We are to be gentle, because God has been gentle with us.

We are far more subordinate to God than any other human will ever be to us. God has far more of a claim on us than we will ever have on any other human being. And we have failed God far more than any human being will ever fail us. And yet, God remains gentle with us. Even in the hardest providences he brings into our lives, he is still being gentle, because he is still working for our good.

God has been so gentle with us. And he calls us to be like him. He calls us to show forth his gentleness in how we treat others – to reveal his heart and his character in our own lives. And that means, Paul says here, that we should be known for our gentleness.

Now, sometimes, our lack of gentleness – our harshness or impatience towards others – grows out of pride in us. We think more highly of ourselves than we should.

And in such cases, the closeness of the Lord should humble us. Because he sees our sin – he sees our failures. And his ongoing gentleness towards us should make us even more gentle towards those who let us down and frustrate us in our lives.

But other times, I think our harshness and our impatience – our lack of gentleness – is more a result of our anxiety and worry.

We fear the consequences of the failures and shortcomings of others. We fear what it will mean for us. We fear what it will mean for them. We feel anxiety and worry about the uncertainties of the future. And so, we react to them with harshness. We lash out in impatience. We come down hard. We cast gentleness aside.

If that’s you ... then our text this morning reminds us that the closeness of the Lord, should ease our fears and anxieties and so enable us to be more gentle towards others. Because you need not fear. Jesus is with you. And he is sovereign.

If anxiety lies behind our harshness and impatience towards others, then prayer which makes our needs known to God, and celebration of God's past faithfulness to us – these reminders of God's love and God's closeness to us should ease our anxieties, and help us to be more gentle.

The Lord has overcome so many of our shortcomings. And so surely he can overcome the shortcomings of others as well. We need not respond with fretful harshness. We can instead, like the Lord, be gentle.

And when we see a lack of gentleness in our lives and in our conduct, it should drive us to prayer – and to renew our focus on the Lord's faithfulness. It should cause us to remind ourselves that the Lord is near, and that he cares for us. He is gentle with us. And so, how can we not be gentle with those he has placed in our charge?

We who have received such gentleness from the Lord should be known to everyone for our gentleness towards others – that is Paul's point in verse five.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the Lord is close to us. The Lord who reigns over all things, the Lord who loves us so much that he died for us, this very Lord Jesus Christ is close to all who call on him in faith.

And so, let us be people who celebrate.

Let us be people who pray.

And as we do, the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

And we will be better able to treat those around us with gentleness and grace.

And so, let us lay hold of these gifts in the gospel, so that Jesus, our gentle Lord, would be seen by the world, in all we say and all we do.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Volf, Mirslav. "What is the Difference Between Joy and Happiness" October 21, 2014.

BigQuestionsOnline.com. Accessed 02/02/17. <https://www.bigquestionsonline.com/2014/10/21/what-difference-between-joy-happiness/>

Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.