

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 20: Spiritual Stability—Part 1: Harmony, Joy, Contentment, Faith Philippians 4:1-6

“Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. 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.”

Here we are, at the outset of the final chapter of this letter. And the first word of it should grab our attention, another famous “therefore”. I do believe this “therefore” to be a summarizing word for the entire letter up until this point. IOW, based upon all of what Paul has said, based upon all of the doctrines that Paul has laid out, (because of the humble servanthood of Jesus Christ, because of His victory over sin and death, for the sake of unity and the advancement of the the gospel despite persecution and opposition), they are to **stand firm**.

I suppose when you think of standing, you think of being idle, and thus not accomplishing anything. But is that what Paul was saying? Was he saying, “In light of everything that Christ has done, and everything that you know—do nothing?!?!?” Quite the opposite of loitering, Paul is using a military term when he commands the Philippians to stand firm. Paul finishes his last chapter to the Ephesians speaking of standing firm, with more detail, **“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore...”** (Eph. 4:11-14)

Therefore, based upon this concept of war, and based upon the detailed enemies of the cross that Paul has just written about, Paul is telling them to stand firm in the battle that is around them. There is a war, but it’s clear that Paul is not telling them to conquer for Christ, rather, he is commanding them to hold the ground that Christ has already conquered. He is reminding them of what he has already told them in 1:27, **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”**

There is another element of standing firm that I want to draw out, and that is the element of stability. A Christian ought to be so rooted in the firm ground of Christ that no wind or wave be able to topple them over. Paul wrote to the Colossians, **“I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.”** (Col. 2:5) Do you see Paul’s concern with being rooted in a proper theology? A mature Christian will not be swayed by illogical and unbiblical argument, they will be firmly planted like a mighty oak in the middle of a field. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, **“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”** (2 Thess. 2:15) Therefore, we stand firm by clinging to the Word of God. Contrarily, James calls the person who has no stability, who is not standing firm, as the one who will not **“receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”** (James 1:8) Peter warns about the false teachers who **“entice unsteady souls”**. (2 Peter 2:14) Peter later warned in his second epistle regarding Paul’s inspired letters, **“There are some things in them that are**

hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.” (2 Peter 3:16-17)

In this lesson we will look at four elements of spiritual stability, found in our text: Harmony, Joy, Contentment, and Faith. In our next lesson we will examine three more: Gratitude, Godly Thinking, and Obedience. But before we get to the list, let’s look at 4:1 again, **“Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown...my beloved.”** As I have mentioned at various points so far, Paul had a deep-rooted love for these saints at Philippi. They had a long relationship, partnered both in evangelism and at this point in financial support. They shared in each others blessings, and even shared persecution. What Paul desired more than anything for these saints, is that they know Christ, that they mature into His likeness, and that they find their joy and satisfaction in Him. Paul longed to be serving with them again. Being tied to a Roman soldier and awaiting his possible execution, Paul’s heart longed to be with them again. They were his crown, which was a cultural way of saying that he considered them as a trophy, as a proof of the saving gospel that he had the privilege of bringing to them.

These saints faced the opposition of false teachers invading the church, both through the Pharisees who added anti-gospel, anti-Christ works to the gospel, and liberal Gentiles who removed the need of repentance from the gospel. These saints needed stability in light of these false teachers, so Paul gives writes to them, and from them we collect a list of seven virtues that will result in spiritual stability.

Harmony: **“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”** There is a little reading between the lines that we can do to help us understand what we are reading about these two women. The reason for reading between the lines is because there’s no other lines that we could read about these two women. Even historically, we know nothing about them. Their names were quite common during this time and place. What we can take from their inclusion in the inspired Word of God, is that their argument was significant. This wasn’t a minor squabble by two new members, or two behind-the-scenes, hardly known people. This was a fight between two members of a church who were well known and influential. The disagreement was probably not doctrinal, concluded because of the lack of Paul’s judgment in who was right, or even the inclusion of the heresy that one woman was introducing. This fight, regardless of the fact that it was a personal conflict, was dangerous enough to split a church into two warring parts, and so Paul makes it a priority to address their need for unity and harmony.

Paul “entreats” both women, repeating the word twice. Different translations of *parakalo* include: Plead (NIV), appeal (NLT), implore (NKJV), and urge (HCSB). IOW, Paul is seriously begging these two women to consider not only their ways, but the health and unity of the church, as well as its impact for the gospel to the world. The Philippians could have known all the right things, believed all the right things, and still had no impact because of their disunity. Paul was no doubt hinting to this very issue earlier in the letter in 1:27 and 2:2 and 14. He begged them to **“agree in the Lord”**, but Paul knew that they would need the help of the church to overcome. Paul begins verse 3 by pleading with another individual to personally help these women to come together on this issue. Paul refers to this person as **“true companion”**, which is odd that he wouldn’t name him or her. He specifically addressed Euodia, Syntyche and Clement by name, so Paul was clearly not trying to speak in code, but this last individual he purposely left unnamed. Some have argued that Paul grouped the entire church into this word *Suzugos* (true companion, literally yokefellow—someone who shares a common burden), but it defies proper grammar to call many people by this singular title. One thing for sure is that this ‘true companion’ knew they were being addressed, and everyone in the church reading the letter would know who this true companion was. In all likelihood this person was one of the elders of the church.

Paul names these two women, and Clement (who we know nothing about), and considers them as one with the rest of his fellow workers. They all labored for the same gospel. They were all members of the same body. Their names were all written in the same book of life. How important it was that they live in peace and harmony, and unity with one another.

Joy: **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”** (4:4) We’ve had quite a few discussions about joy up to this point. This being the reason why joy is the theme of the letter. Paul told them how he prayed for them with joy. (1:4) Paul told them about his present circumstances in prison, and how there are those who are against him who are also advancing the gospel, and he rejoiced in knowing that souls were being reached for Christ. (1:18) Paul spoke about the need for unity, and how he rejoiced that the saints were of the same mind. (2:2) Uncertain of his fate, he refused to complain at what lay ahead of him. And he commanded the Philippians to not complain about their lot, but rather to remain humble and trust in God. Regardless of what the Lord had in store for Paul, he rejoiced, and commanded the Philippians to rejoice also. (2:17-18) Paul commanded the Philippians to rejoice at the return of Ephaphroditus. (2:28) Although the church is plagued with false teachers who attack from different angles, Paul commanded the Philippians to rejoice. (3:1) And now once again Paul returns to the theme.

We should understand from the fact that Paul has to repeat the command, not just twice in this verse, but for the seventh time in this letter (and he’s not done yet) that he is quite serious about rejoicing, and that it’s not natural or easy to do so. When a comedian is on stage and telling joke after joke, he doesn’t have to remind people to laugh every thirty seconds. When someone you love dies, no one has to remind you to cry. So why then does Paul have to remind Christians to rejoice?

While we’ve spoken about this in the past, for the sake of those who may be new to the class, and also for the sake of repetition, we’ll walk through it again. To begin, Paul has to remind these believers to rejoice, because believers’ don’t naturally or habitually rejoice. The common misconception about rejoicing is that it’s emotional. When people hear the command *rejoice*, they hear the command *be happy*. And to many it sounds a little cold, a little disconnected, a little naïve, to walk up to someone who is going through the toughest time of their life, and command them to smile. But that’s the error. Joy and happiness are different words because they’re different altogether. Happiness is eating a warm blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream for dessert. And that happiness goes away when it’s falls all over the floor five minutes before your guests arrive for dinner. Happiness is an emotion, it is fleeting. It comes and goes depending upon the constantly changing, and uncontrollable circumstances of your life. Joy is quite the opposite. Joy is constant. And joy is constant because it is rooted in the goodness of God that is shown to the believer through Christ in the gospel. The gospel is a game-changer. When the believer remembers all that God is: in His character, and His power, and sovereign control. When the believer remembers that God is his Father who loves him, and directs every element of his life, joy takes place!

So Paul can rejoice over the saints because he knows that God has sovereignly and graciously saved them, and is preserving them, and perfecting them. Paul can rejoice that God is using even Paul’s detractors to reach the lost with the gospel. Paul knows that God is in control. Paul knows that God will judge fairly. Paul could rejoice over his life, regardless of the persecution he endured, because he trusted in God. He knew that God was not only well aware of his persecution, but also working it out for Paul’s good and His glory. It’s not easy to rejoice. No one is commanding a good laugh when crying is appropriate. Paul is commanding Christians to constantly remember the God who reigns above. A joy like that will strengthen faith and prayer, and will put the sin of worry and anxiety to death.

Read Matt Chandler’s [To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain](#): pg. 149-152, 160-161.

Contentment: **“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.”** The word translated in the ESV as *reasonableness* is the Greek word *epieikes*. This word is incredibly rich in meaning, and therefore it has

been translated to many different English words in other versions of the Bible. MacArthur describes the complexity of *epieikes* and its many meanings, he writes, “*Sweet reasonableness, generosity, goodwill, friendliness, magnanimity, charity toward the faults of others, mercy towards the failure of others, indulgence of the failure of others, leniency, bigheartedness, moderation, forbearance, and gentleness are some of the attempts to capture the rich meaning of epieikes. Perhaps the best corresponding English word is graciousness—the graciousness of humility; the humble graciousness that produces the patience to endure injustice, disgrace, and mistreatment without retaliation, bitterness, or vengeance. It is contentment.*”¹⁰¹

Contrary to the cultural message that focuses on self: meeting our every desire, fulfilling our dreams, pampering ourselves, finding our “me time”, taking care of “#1”, Paul is commanding believers for being known by everyone as someone who puts those things last and cares much for others. This can only be accomplished through a spirit of contentment. Contentment is not earned, it is put on. The lie of contentment is “If you strive and attain this, you’ll be content.” You won’t. There is nothing in the created order that will satisfy your soul. The sooner in life you master that truth, the greater of a blessing you’ll enjoy, and be to others. It’s not just a matter of pursuing blantly evil things above our Lord. Discontented living can be the idea of filling our lives with so many amoral activities that we crowd out the work that our Lord would have us do. There’s nothing wrong with flowers, or smelling them. But a generation of Christians whose lives could be labeled as “smelling the flowers” is a wasted generation for the gospel. Flowers will never satisfy your soul. God made them so you would enjoy them, and smell them. But God never intended for his people waste their lives searching for contentment in them. Of course, you can substitute flowers with any other thing under the sun. John Piper said, “*When people cast fear to the wind and spend themselves and risk their lives and fortune in the cause of God’s truth, and in love for other people, then God is revealed for who He really is: infinitely valuable and satisfying—so much so that His people don’t need the fleeting pleasures of sin in order to be content.*”

A couple of verses from this letter, one past at this point and one future, will help to underline this point. Philippians 2:3-4, 4:11-13, “**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others...Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.**”

Faith: “**The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything.**” The first to clear up about this verse are the words we have translated *at hand* (engus). It can be understood two ways: The Lord’s return is near, or that He is near us all of the time. While both are always true, which is intended by Paul in this verse? We get an understanding of the nearness of God in Psalms, 34:18, “**The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.**” 75:1, “**We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks, for your name is near.**” 145:18, “**The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.**” This could be the sense of the word that Paul is intending. Some say more directly than others that to interpret *at hand* to mean the eschatological return of Christ is to leave the context of the verse. (John MacArthur, W. Michaelis, F.F. Bruce and G.B. Caird, R. Martin and Calvin for example.) While others, like Lloyd-Jones, and Hansen argue the complete opposite, that the meaning is completely eschatological, and to interpret otherwise is to abandon context. Then there is Gerald Hawthorne who sees both meanings in the text. So I must choose the side that convicts me most, and so I have.

¹⁰¹ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 276)

Truly, our Lord is nearer to His return now than He was yesterday. And we could teach a Sunday School lesson about resting in the sure coming of our Lord, and living for that day. But I don't see the need for a double meaning in verse 5. Concerning the daily conduct, the present attitude and hope of the believers, they must remember that our Lord is always near us. He is readily available, and aware, and concerned for us. This is the comfort that I believe Paul wants the believer to have.

Paul reminded the Philippians of the Lord's nearness because they were undergoing many trials, and many times believers who are under stress tend to forget the truths that they ought to cherish in those times. It's a shame when we leave our Systematic Theologies in the classroom. The truths that our God is all-present, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-wise should comfort us. The fact that He is sovereign, that He is our Father who loves us ought to be cherished and clung onto tightly. In the heat of the battle, the Christian soldier will buckle if he/she doesn't stand in those truths. There is a stability that comes from keeping our faith rooted in the only true God.

MacArthur writes, *"The Lord who is near is the almighty, true, and living God revealed in scripture. Those who delight themselves in His holy power, love, and wisdom and cultivate a deep knowledge of Him by studying and meditating on His Word will live by the foundation of that truth and be spiritually stable. Because of the presence of God, believers are to be anxious for nothing. Nothing is outside of His sovereign control or too difficult for Him to handle. A low view of God leads to a myriad of problems in the church."*

MacArthur then quotes A.W. Tozer's The Knowledge of the Holy, *"The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshipping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic. The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking."*¹⁰²

Believers are to walk with a strong faith and trust in the Lord who is near and actively working in them for their good and His glory. Paul will tell them in 4:19 that it's God who **"will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."** What kind of message would it be to the watching world if the Philippians walked around scared, frazzled, worried about their health, and finances, and safety, while echoing to the world 4:19! We either have faith, or we don't. I don't see a tightrope to walk the middle. Anxiety is a sin. And it is the direct result of not placing your faith in who Christ says He is, and what the Bible says He did.

We as believers are to be strong, and stable. This begins with our harmony, since we are one in body, and mind, and spirit—no one stands on a fractured leg. Our stability comes from our joy, because we look to Christ and His work on the cross, and not to ourselves. Our stability comes from our contentment, since we are not wasting our lives building temporary castles here on earth, we should be living with eternity in Christ in mind. And finally for this lesson, our stability comes from our faith, when our eyes wander, so do we. When our eyes are fixed upon Jesus Christ as He is revealed in scripture, we will stand firm!

¹⁰² MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 279)