

# **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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## **Philippians 4: Rejoice: Delighting in God's Grace**

### **Philippians 4**

I like to write letters. I take that back, I like to type letters. My handwriting looks like that of a four-year old child and I still fully rely on the art of cursive handwriting, which does not help out my legibility. When I was dating my husband, we were long distance and put a lot of time and thought into writing each other daily emails. For one of our anniversaries I gave him this big black binder filled with all of our emails I had printed out. They are full of bad typos, even worse jokes, and the daily adventures our days had caused. The end of the letters were the mushy stuff. The really important stuff. This is where we would talk about our future plans together, love, and rainbows—that last part was a joke! When you get towards the end of a letter, you really have to give it your all. Your last important sentiments, the lasting impression you want people to sit with.

We have been in Philippians these last few months, getting to know the church and Paul's relationship with them. Chapter 4 is the last in the Philippians letter. From walking through the other chapters we have gotten an idea that there is division in the Church, some disunity with members. But Paul gives great advice and encouragement by telling us this reality is one of choice. Open with me to Philippians 4:1-7.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! 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. 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.

Paul makes strides to unify the Church. To say, "You've been at odds and it's not helping the gospel and there is good work to be done. Instead of the way you've been acting, be THIS way. It will be better for you and better for the Church." First he addresses Euodia and Syntyche, two women who are dealing with an unnamed dispute. If you're anything like me, when you read the Bible and you get to the weird, unpronounceable names, you might gloss over and skip ahead to the juicy parts. But it's worth asking the question, "Why is Paul writing to these women specifically and what does it mean for me today?"

Paul clearly felt that not only these women, but the entire church, had something crucial to lose if they didn't come together to resolve their issues. I love that it was important enough to Paul to speak to them directly. God had/has plans for the individuals of the church but they are called to

reconciliation first and foremost to further God's good work. As Paul says "they have contended at his side for the cause of the Gospel."

The fact is, Paul is talking to REAL people with REAL problems, not just an ambiguous community with fake/general problems. This is a letter. It's personal. These two women have real problems. Two women whom Paul really wants to see work for the kingdom, who have done kingdom work well in the past.

Instead of commanding them or calling their specific sins or disagreements out, he just says in his uncomplicated fashion to "be of the same mind in the Lord." This is how Paul starts the end of his letter—on a personal note, that invites the community to support one another, to unify, and to be like Christ.

At CPC, Easter is a time when I think we really unite well as a church. Every service is packed with familiar and new faces and there is a togetherness that happens among family and friends. This last year for Easter, I got to be a part of the planning process for the Table. Our team wanted to create a space that would give people the invitation to really go wild for Jesus. To really let their hair down and toss their shoes off. Full disclosure, I DID try to get kazoo's and noise-makers into the service but was vetoed. Maybe next year?

We started Easter night waiting in anticipation in the Great Room. We had decorated the room in standard party apparel: streamers, lanterns, and trays of gummy worms...the anticipation of the service building. Eventually we entered the dimly lit sanctuary to start the service. Worship felt like I was personally and literally a 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks finale. I was clapping, jumping, hootin, and hollering. To end our worship we took communion. But not just any communion. Kyle Jackson did the words of institution and in true fashion, he was a FESTIVAL. He got the crowd to jump up, high five each other, shout, whistle, and punch the air as if we were all just told that Minnesota was going to skip winter next year. It was delightfully and ridiculously holy. I felt overcome with the Holy Spirit. Afterwards we all joined in the great room for food, music, and togetherness... all a little buzzed with the spirit inside of us.

Paul writes in verse 4. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" The message version translates verse 4 to say. "Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in Him!"  
**Revel in Him.**

On Easter, we REVELED in him. We were all in awe of the holy celebration that was before us and happening inside of us. Because we were celebrating a God who was near. Paul tells us in verse 5 that the "Lord is near." **The Lord is near.** He is.

We became present to him that night because He makes HIS presence known to us daily. Because he delights in US, we choose to delight in HIM. With God, relationship is a two way street. He creates us, he affirms us, commands us, invites us, liberates us and we in turn, come to Him just as we are. We surrender, seek, ask, delight, worship, and celebrate. As James 4:8 so eloquently puts it, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Whether we like it or not or understand it fully or not, we worship a God who responds to our being. God responds to our BEING. He responds to what we say and do. And the grace of it all, is that we get to respond to everything He says and does too. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Rejoice in Greek is translated as *chairó* (khai'-ee-ro) which means to delight in God's *grace*- literally, to experience *God's grace*. Rejoice means to experience God's grace. One reason Paul is so adamant about unifying the church is that we can't really come to a place of rejoicing God, if we are divided in the church,

the house of God. We, like Euodia and Syntyche, need to reconcile first so that we can rejoice more fully, to delight in God's graces. We are incapable of constant delight when we have junk that needs to be cleaned. Why would we want to experience God's grace? Why WOULDN'T you?? God is here and we can choose to either acknowledge and experience His grace or ignore it. I know personally I can't afford to ignore His grace. Verse 5, Paul tells us the Lord is NEAR and He is here and now, and God responds to us and asks for our response. His presence calls for immediate action—His presence calls for immediate action.

So how do we do this? It sounds nice right? In verses 5-7, Paul gives the reader some really practical advice for getting to a place where the Philippians CAN rejoice always. To be clear, Paul is not telling the church or us to be happy all the time. That's not possible. I believe Paul hopes followers of Christ will be ACTIVELY entering into a process that will lead us to experience God's grace. That is to say that it IS a process. We need to work on things in our lives, with God, to get that place of being able to rejoice always. To delight in His grace always. There are four suggested actions in verses 5-7 that can help bring us to a place of rejoicing more.

1. Don't be anxious about anything.
2. Let your gentleness be evident to all.
3. In prayer and petition...present your request to God.
4. In thanksgiving...present your request to God.

I love birthdays. I love celebrating other people's birthdays and, I'll be honest, I love celebrating my own. Last year I had my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was on the phone with a girlfriend deciding how to celebrate myself. Admittedly not a humble experience but I have no regrets. After the phone call we concluded that I should definitely have a birthday party for myself and it should definitely be themed.

I love costumes and I have a love for the 50s and 60s, so it only seemed logical to have a 50s/60s themed birthday party. I would play records, make a Jell-O mold, wear pearls, smoke candy cigarettes, and eat some deviled eggs. These things, in my mind, made it markedly the 50s.

Unfortunately the planning process had begun too late, leaving only a 2 week notice to invite people to this party. This is the part in the story where I worried. I am a people pleaser and hospitality can bring me to a dark place of no-return when it comes to worrying. I was constantly checking my online invitation to see who had sent RSVPs, worried no one could come on such late notice. This caused me to worry about how much food to buy, which led to an unnecessary trip to SAM's club where all food is the size of a baby horse. I even spent hours one Saturday scouring Minneapolis for vintage glass tumblers for the party. I had anxiety that people had better things to do, didn't care about me. Deep down I feared I wasn't good enough.

My girlfriend had to talk me off the ledge a few times, and my husband had to endure more birthday conversation than should happen in a lifetime. I was clearly out of my mind. The saddest part was it was supposed to be a celebration. It should have been a fun, delightful process. My husband was anything but delighted. I believe at one point he stated we would never plan a birthday party again. I was too worked up. I worried. I did anything but delight.

The party ended up being really great, it was super fun. People wore amazing outfits: lace, ties, and retro eyewear were plentiful. A lot of people were able to make the last minute invite and in the end, to the eye rolling of my husband, I declared we should do this EVERY year! But if I'm honest, there were moments that I was more worried about who couldn't make it than I was

celebrating who could. More time spent worrying about what food wasn't being eaten, than enjoying the fun conversations happening around me. Cleaning up the food and drinks before people had even put their shoes on to leave. It might sound silly but it was how I honestly felt and it affected my way of life at the time.

Maybe it's not a party for you but have any of you ever worried about something that later seemed so pointless to spend time thinking about? Have you ever worried you weren't good enough or maybe even good looking enough? Have you ever had anxiety over making sure everyone is enjoying themselves? Ever cared too much what someone else thought when the reality is they don't define you as a person? God alone defines you.

Worried you wouldn't have enough money to do and get everything you need or just want? . Have any of you just ever worried too much?

Feared you would be alone in life? Fear you might be stuck in the same place forever? Fear you might never settle down? Worried you might never get over that person, that addiction, that loss, that pain? To the point where you are motionless from the weight of it all? You can't move towards experiencing God's grace because you can't move at all. Proverbs 12:25 says, "Worry weighs a person down." I felt the reality of that at my party.

I have spent a lot of my life worrying. Over my body image, over relationships, over a sale, traveling, parties, girlfriends, my job, finances, debt, my future, my status, my schedule. I wonder what God's grace would've felt like in all the times I didn't leave space for it? All the times I probably needed it most. I don't want to dwell on my past worries but wonder about the potential to rejoice more going forward. Its sounds like a better way of life to me.

**Worry does not allow us to delight in God's grace. How can we move towards delight if we are weighed down by anxiety, fear, and worry?** Paul gives great advice for this. He writes in verse 6, "...but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Let's start with the first part: "In every situation by prayer and petition." These are action words. Verbs. We actually have to DO them. Faith in action.

In prayer and petition, we are coming towards God. We are handing off the weight to Him, becoming lighter in the process and perhaps more full of light ourselves. Have you ever written a letter or sent an email that was really hard for you to write? Sometimes for myself it's easier to write how I am feeling before I face someone with whom I am in conflict.

There is that moment you click send or put the letter in the mail, that moment when we often say "It took a weight off my shoulders." That feeling of deep relief that affects your muscles and lets you breathe easy.

I used to keep a prayer journal and I would only write my prayers and praises in it. Nothing too wordy, a few sentences each night before bed. It was amazing over time to see how those prayers got answered. Not always in the most expected or wanted way but always answered. We worship a God that WANTS to hear from us. I was on a run the other day and ran past a sign on a church that read, "**If you're feeling far from God, who moved?**" I kind of smirked at the simplicity of the statement. It's easy to move away from God when we are frustrated and then consequently blame him for being so "distant." When really the whole time it was us that took a few steps backward. Praying is not always easy. It is a very vulnerable thing to do, it's an act of faith. When we pray, we acknowledge our utter dependence on God, while at the same time expressing our complete trust in Him.

The second way to experience God's grace more is to, "**Let your gentleness be evident to all.**" Paul was telling the Philippians really to be FOR one another; to support, unify, encourage one another. If we want to experience God's grace, His holiness and goodness, we actually have to start practicing that with one another. Do unto others as you would have done unto you—it's an oldie but a goodie! When we practice gentleness, we usually receive it back from others.

When we are kind to others, we leave space for delight. Smile at someone at the store, thank people graciously, actually listen when someone talks, don't cut people off on the road, share food, your home, your money, your time. Big and small, when we are gentle with one another, we create a gentler world, leaving space for EVERYONE to delight in God's grace.

The third thing we can do to be more available to experience God's grace is very similar to the first step mentioned. **We need to come to God with our request in THANKSGIVING.** Not only do we need to be clear about our needs, hurts, struggles, questions, but we also need to be clear with God about what we are THANKFUL for.

I mentioned how I love birthdays, including my own. One reason is I love gifts, I love to get the perfect gift for a friend and to get the perfect gift from a friend. Let's be honest. Who doesn't love getting a good birthday gift? Sometimes people think just because you are past the age of 20 you shouldn't need a birthday gift but I really beg to differ. Now I don't need or expect any huge gifts from anyone. Economic times are rough and I really find a lot of joy in the little things friends and family gift me. It's always the thought that counts.

Growing up in a divorced family, I always had two birthday experiences. One with my mom. And one with my dad. To this day, I will hear from my mom on my birthday, get a little something from her, maybe go out to a meal together and then I will do the same with my father. Except for this last year.

My birthday rolled around and I eagerly and faithfully checked the mailbox daily to see what gifts I would behold. Yes, there are a few things wrong with this picture. There in the mail a few days before my birthday was my mom's gift. Wonderful. Then...My birthday came and went. And one thing was missing. A present from my dad.

I checked the mail day after day, assuming it was lost. Waiting to hear my dad's voice on the other end of the phone asking me "Hey did you get my card?" Nothing. I was shocked. My first birthday without a material gift from my dad. Now I assume this day comes for everyone. A day when your family decides you're too old, your job is too stable, you already have everything. Whatever the reason.

Now the crazy thing is my dad would do ANYTHING for me and he DOES do a lot of things for me without me ever expecting it. His pick-up truck is always ready to use at a moment's notice. Breakfast at Bunny's is ALWAYS on him. Tools and handy man time are aplenty on his agenda. He's even a great grandpa to my dog. But here I was caught in a moment of ungratefulness. "How could you Father? How could you not lavish your gifts upon me, your only daughter?"

I had no space for gratitude. I had a gratitude attitude. You heard correctly. I totally made up that term. I had a gratitude attitude. I could not possibly remember all the things my dad DOES give me when I absolutely do not deserve it. All the ways he lavishes me with the things only he can provide that sometimes I don't even need.

I expected something from my father that he was not obligated to give me and I was quick to forget all the unexpected gifts he gives me all the time for which I do not express thanks or appreciation. The same sentiment could be said of our Heavenly Father. Sometimes we are so QUICK to expect things from God and so SLOW to be grateful for the ways He lavishes us with things we don't deserve. Our Father loves us and knows our hearts. Matthew 6:32-33 says, "Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need." What is possibly missing from that sentence? It's everything we NEED.

If you're not thankful, then you're only ungrateful.

**Paul tells us to worry less, practice gentleness, pray, be thankful in the process.** To move towards Him, to acknowledge his nearness. To respond to Him and He, in turn, our faithful God, will respond to us. "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When we move towards God, he moves towards us.

Do you want to know what rejoicing in God always looks like? It's peace. A constant cycle...we submit our fears to Him, delight in Him, experience His grace. He gives us a kind of peace that is beyond our human comprehension and we again delight because we don't have to live under the weight of worry.

These steps are not magical, they won't fix everything overnight. They are part of a large process. Like all relationships, the one we have with God takes time, care, and intentionality. It takes verbs. We need to DO some things to draw near to God, to respond to His being. We need to be aware of HIS responses to OUR being—listen for the answers to our prayers, hand over our burdens, **be gracious and gentle.** If you are willing to engage in the process, you might find that rejoicing in God always is your new reality. It won't look like happiness or a smile on your face always. Peace lies deeper than what the face can portray. **But if you choose, and it IS your choice, you can move towards God. He IS near and IS delightful.**

Let us pray.

God. We praise You for Your ability to be right here, right now. We admit the tasks Paul sets before us seem a little daunting at times but you have made them worth it. You are worthy God. Let us prove that to you daily. Amen.

Benediction

If you are serious about this. If you are willing to enter into the process of rejoicing God always, then let's start with Paul's words in verses 8-9...

**8** 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. **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.

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