

Living in a culture

Philippians 4:1–9

Next Sunday a special guest preacher, Andy McQuitty, from Irving Bible Church, will share a powerful message from Philippians 4. So to prepare us for that message, we're reprinting an Engage God Daily from 2017 on this amazing passage. It's a "best of" from our archives by Barry Applewhite.

Day 1: First looks

Barry Applewhite, author

The passage for this week is one that Paul has been aiming for in his prior writing in this letter. Though the assembly in Roman Philippi is by no means in crisis, their unity is essential to proclaiming the good news about what God has done in Jesus Christ. Yet this colony of heaven lives in Roman Philippi, and their new mindset interfaces with that culture. What was essential for them to figure out is also vital for us!

Philippians 4:1–9

¹Therefore, 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!

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, 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.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, 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. ⁹Whatever 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.

- What affectionate language do you find in this section?
- What does Paul say about various emotions in this section?
- What spiritual models does Paul point to?

Day 2: Unity in leadership

Barry Applewhite, author

There is a certain cultural tendency in America to confine religious action within local Christian assemblies. Some among us may even think that being unified only has to do with religious issues. One thing Paul teaches us here is that our shared faith in Christ extends into the heart of our relationships with each other. Whatever the insular tendencies of our culture, we who call Jesus our Lord share too much to allow ourselves to be at odds with each other.

Philippians 4:1–3

¹ 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!

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ 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.

What does Paul want from the two women he names?

Commentary

Once again, the starting word of verse 1 looks backward, and in this case the prior referent is our citizenship in heaven (3:20) that promises us a Savior who will transform us bodily to be like him (3:21).

Verse 1 is bursting with love for the believers in Roman Philippi. In its usual concession to English literary style, the NIV translates the same Greek adjective with the two different phrases: “you whom I love” and “dear friends.” The former is closer to the meaning and shows how strongly Paul feels about these people.

When Paul calls them “my joy and my crown” (verse 1), he is talking about the pride he will feel on the day of Christ to see their faith vindicated along with his own. Within this praise, Paul appeals to them to “stand firm in the Lord,” using a verb with a “military flavor.”¹ Note carefully that the place where they are to hold their ranks is “in the Lord.” Everything goes back to their relationship with Jesus. Hansen makes the keen observation that in Philippians, we are told to stand firm in relation to 1) our heavenly citizenship, 2) those who oppose the cross of Christ, and 3) adopting the same mindset.²

I commend the NIV for using the phrase “I plead with” twice in verse 2, because Paul makes his

¹ Douglas Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 320.

² G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009) 281.

appeal to each woman absolutely identical. His point is not about their differences but about what he wants them to have in common. What is that? The NIV says: “to be of the same mind in the Lord.” Their shared relationship to Jesus supersedes everything else. The translation could have also been: “have the same mindset in the Lord.”³ Once again we find the verb *phroneo* (meaning “set one’s mind on”), used here for the sixth time out of seven total uses in this letter. Mindset is a major theme in this letter.

There is little doubt that Euodia and Syntyche were influential women in the assembly and possibly leaders as well. Roman Philippi lay in the Greek region of Macedonia (also a Roman province). Fee informs us that women in this region had a much larger role in public life than in other areas under Roman control.⁴ We also know that important women were among Paul’s first converts in Roman Philippi (Acts 16:13–15).

We do not know the identity of the “true companion” (verse 3) who Paul asks to help in the reconciliation, but plainly everyone involved does know. Paul speaks of the two women by saying “they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel,” using the Greek verb *sunathleo*. This verb gives us a military metaphor for troops fighting side-by-side in battle.⁵ To those who keep wanting to see athletic metaphors in Philippians I say, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” (smile)

You will also note in verse 3 that Paul says all who fought for the gospel with him have their names “in the book of life.” Bockmuehl explains, “The Book of Life is to be opened on the day of judgment, and only those written in it will enter the kingdom of heaven (e.g. Dan. 12:1; Rev. 21:27).”⁶

Is there any relationship between you and someone at Christ Fellowship that needs reconciliation for the sake of greater unity in Christ? What about believers who do not attend Christ Fellowship?

Day 3: Finding emotional security

Barry Applewhite, author

If there is one thing I can say about the peace of God, it would be that few people seem to take advantage of it! Paul says not to be anxious about anything, but I am anxious about too many things! How about you? However, Paul’s commands in this section demonstrate that a better grip on spiritual realities could turn anxiety into rejoicing.

Philippians 4:4–6

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!⁵ Let your gentleness be

³ Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 391.

⁴ Fee, *Philippians*, 390–391 and footnote 31.

⁵ Fee, *Philippians*, 166 cites the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3.296.

⁶ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 242.

evident to all. The Lord is near.⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In what situations are we to pray?

Commentary

Paul's initial (and repeated) command to rejoice (verse 4) suggests to me that the believers in Roman Philippi may have allowed themselves to slip into a defeatist mentality. That is easy to do when the surrounding culture is unsympathetic or even hostile to the cause of Christ. Paul wants them to refocus as they realize that in Christ they have the final victory in hand. The battle has been won by the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus, but the enemy troops have not yet put down their weapons in acceptance of defeat.

In verse 5, Paul calls upon these believers to manifest gentleness toward all people, and a closer study indicates that this trait resembles the gentle and kind disposition of God in showing mercy. The same Greek adjective is used in Psalm 86:5 (LXX) to translate a Hebrew word expressing God's readiness to forgive. It is interesting that Paul includes this statement in verse 5: "The Lord is near." Perhaps this statement means that the one who was gentle and forbearing with us is near to help us treat others in the same manner. No doubt the nearness of the Lord also relates to verse 6.

Cultural hostility in Roman Philippi could certainly provoke anxiety, but Paul encourages prayer to the Lord who is near. He uses three different words for prayer (verse 6), possibly suggesting the appropriateness of prayer to every kind of situation that brings anxiety. The result of responding to threats through prayer is that the peace of God (verse 7) – something the unbelieving mind can neither predict nor understand – will guard your hearts and your thoughts. Once again, Paul uses military language for the verb translated "guard."

Bockmuehl joins others in suggesting Paul is indirectly bringing to mind the Roman garrison stationed in Philippi to keep the *pax Romana* (Latin: "Roman peace").⁷ Just as that garrison guards the region for Rome, so God guards the hearts and thoughts of those in Christ Jesus. Again and again, everything comes back to our relationship to Jesus.

When you read the Bible, are you looking for rules to follow or thinking about how you could walk through life more like your Lord? Explain.

Day 4: Cultural influences

Barry Applewhite, author

How to live close to Christ has always been a challenge since our daily lives are lived out in a particular culture. In today's passage, Paul gives us a plan for solving this problem on a continuing basis.

⁷ Bockmuehl, *Philippians*, 242.

Philippians 4:8–9

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.

Which part of this passage relates to thinking, and which part involves action?

Commentary

Although the citizens of Roman Philippi were Roman to the core, it may help for you to know that Romans adopted many things from Greek culture including their understanding of morality. Fee has an outstanding analysis of verses 8–9, showing that verse 8 could have mostly been drawn from the very kind of (Stoic) moral exhortation that people in Roman Philippi grew up with.⁸

But Paul is not telling them to adopt Stoic moral philosophy whole-hog; he qualifies such moral teachings (verse 8a) in two ways. First, he qualifies such moral belief with the clause “if anything is excellent or praiseworthy” (verse 8b). But how does this qualification work? Fee explains that they may take into account “the good they have long known from their past, as long as it is conformable to Christ.”⁹

But that tool can still be difficult to use for those new to faith in Christ or those who have neglected their relationship to Christ. So, Paul gives them a second method in verse 9: they are to imitate him as he imitates Jesus Christ. Paul grew up in the same Greek moral culture, even though Tarsus was far from Roman Philippi, and he has already had to pick and choose those cultural elements acceptable to Christ.

Now that we have a general understanding of how verses 8 and 9 work, the verbs that Paul uses deserve some consideration. When the NIV translates the first verb with “think about,” it is working with the Greek verb *logizomai*. The ANLEX lexicon tells us that the basic meaning of *logizomai* is: “think according to logical rules.”¹⁰ The BDAG-3 lexicon offers: “to give careful thought to a matter.”¹¹ So, evaluating the moral values we learned in our culture – and how Jesus might change them – is not some fleeting thought! Further, the verse is present tense, and that implies that such serious evaluation of cultural values must continue.

The second verb that I want to mention is easier to understand but harder to do! That verb is translated by the NIV as “put into practice.” Another take is that in the ANLEX lexicon: “of pressing through on an action carry out.” I like what ANLEX says because Paul is talking about a complex transformation of their behavior that follows a careful evaluation of their culture. *Prasso* can be used for completing a journey, and Paul is summoning the believers in Roman Philippi to a figurative

⁸ Fee, *Philippians*, 414.

⁹ Fee, *Philippians*, 415–6 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ ANLEX, *logizomai*, ponder, q.v.

¹¹ ANLEX, *logizomai*, ponder, q.v.

journey of moral and behavioral transformation that imitates Paul as he imitates Christ.

Have you considered what you learned growing up and whether any of it must change as you strive to follow Christ? The answer matters, and I ask that you explain it so that you see the issue clearly.

Day 5: Applying what you have learned

Barry Applewhite, author

In discussing Paul's command to rejoice in Christ always (Philippians 4:4), Fee notes with disapproval that various Christian groups have adopted "the wearing of black clothes and the long face" as their outward expression of Christian piety.¹²

How does that particular expression of Christian piety described above fit with what Paul teaches? What do you see at Christ Fellowship in your circle of friends that either does or does not match that approach to Christian life? What role does joy play?

In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul talks about turning our anxiety into God's protective peace through prayer.

What role does prayer play in your life, and how do you use it (or how could you use it) to deal with the anxiety that our age provides in plenty?

Trying to figure out something in American culture that Christ would approve or do is not a trivial matter. You need to interact with those who are mature in Christ to get their ideas. Here is one such area:

What kinds of media do you consume, and what do you suppose Jesus would say about your choices? What about your social media postings? In what way do they represent Christ's kingdom?

¹² Fee, Philippians, 404.