

Philippians 4:4-7—Protecting Peace

We understand the importance of peace. We cherish the time when the noise of the world isn't so loud. We love the feeling of people getting along and working together. We look forward to peace of mind and a quiet heart without stress of life and burdens of responsibility. We also understand this peace is fragile. There's always more things on our mind and need our attention. All it takes is a scared child crying out from a nightmare to shatter a peaceful evening. One little ding from a phone interrupts a peaceful conversation. One word or phrase can destroy a peaceful relationship. We know how precious peace is and how fragile it can be so we want to protect it. Roman general Vegetius famously wrote, "If you want peace, prepare for war." In other words you better have the strength to protect it and fight for it. You want to keep the peace—so you won't bring up that conversation during the holiday season with family. You want to have some resemblance of peace, so you will do things you might not particularly enjoy to maintain it. That's what makes what Paul says in Philippians 4 so interesting. Instead of telling you to carefully guard this peace, he says this peace guards you. Instead of calling you to defend it, Paul says peace will be your defense. This peace is different from what the world offers. This is God's peace that protects you.

Paul writes, "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*⁵ *Let your gentleness be 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.*"

After all the years of fighting for the Empire, many Roman soldiers chose this city, Philippi, as their retirement home. It was a popular choice because outside the city was a Roman garrison, a group of soldiers, whose job was to guard and protect the city and keep the peace. They would warn of any incoming attack, defend and protect the city. So the retired soldier could sit back and relax in peaceful retirement knowing someone protects him.

Amongst these retired soldiers and the other citizens of that city Paul found a Christian church. When you read this letter Philippians (which you should do this week; it's pretty short) you won't find huge controversies that Paul needs to address. At the same time, this church does have its own fair share of issues. Pride evidently was a problem so Paul reminds them of the need to be humble as Christ is humble. He calls them to be united warning against divisions in the congregation while also encouraging to watch out for those whose focus is too much on earthly things. There are some financial issues in this church too. In Philippians 4 Paul gives us one the most important sections on financial stewardship in the Bible. He encourages us to be content while having full confidence

that God is able and will meet every need. We also see some anxiety amongst these Christians for the future and the future of their church. They are concerned for Paul as he sits in prison while he writes this letter. This outside opposition to the gospel, anxiety, financial stress, fighting amongst the brothers and sisters, selfishness, are attacking the joy and peace God gives.

Sound familiar? Whether it is with our own church or it's in your personal life, there is so much trying to rob you of God's peace, the contentment it brings and the joy we have in all things. You know the attacks. You feel them. It's happening just as Jesus said it would: the world is becoming less Christian and opposing the gospel. Whether it's direct attacks against God's Word or it's the attack of apathy—not caring—you feel it.

With all these attacks we might find ourselves worrying and being anxious. There might be anxiety over our own church and its future ministry. What's going to happen to our school? Where's the money going to come from? What are we going to do? We might be anxious over inflation—everything is getting so expensive! How are you supposed to keep up? How am I supposed to pay the bills and take care of my family? You see our country and might be anxious about some of the things that are going on and decisions that are being made. You might be anxious about whether or not you are making the right decisions for yourself. You might be anxious about past decisions that plague you and present consequences. You might be anxious about your children and the decisions they are making, your grandchildren and what is happening to them. We might be anxious about the future and what it holds. We tell ourselves that if we just have the right answers to the right questions, we'll be less anxious. But, if we are honest with ourselves, we would find something else to be anxious about...

But what good does that do? Yes, we want to be concerned and mindful. At the same time, too often we allow that concern to turn into anxiety and worrying. What good does worrying do about all these earthly matters when it won't add a single day, hour, minute to your life?

What it does do is make it difficult to let your gentleness be known to all. This gentleness means patience with one another. It's not insisting on every right rule or law. You are not going to trouble yourself with making sure they know you are right or getting your way. Getting even when someone has hurt or wronged you is far from your mind. Be gentle. This doesn't mean we condone or ignore sin. Yes, confront the sin and sinner, and do so with a gentle spirit. Be patient. You don't not know the whole story. Even if you're pretty sure you know what they deserve, love them. Let go of yourself, your pride, your sense of justice, and let God deal with it. Put it into his hands. Forgive. That's why we are here on this earth, after all. Our ultimate purpose in this world is to share Jesus' love while serving each other. And not just to Christians, to all. That

includes the person who has hurt you. That means the person who shares your opinion and also disagrees with you. This includes the person you don't think deserves it. There's no room for macho, stubbornness, "I'm going to do what I want." Let your gentleness be known to all.

But when we are anxious and worrying, it's so easy to get caught up in this felt need to be right, to make sure your opinion is not only heard but validated. Instead of being gentle and patient with one another, we hold tightly to that grudge and want them to feel it. We want to protect ourselves, our own personal peace and peace for those we love. So we convince ourselves that if I don't do or say something, no one will. We feel this need to defend ourselves against whatever they might have said. And for what?

What it does do is rob us of having joy. Instead of thanksgiving and prayers to the Lord, there's finger pointing at whose fault it is. There's whining and complaining about this person and what they aren't doing and more complaining about what they are doing. Instead of gentleness, we put down others to protect ourselves. Instead of serving and loving, we are turned inwards focused on protecting me, my time, myself. Instead of unity there's division. Instead of opening doors to shine Jesus' light on this world and share his love, these actions slam the door in people's faces. Why would they want anything to do with us if we are just going to act the same way as the world around us?

John the Baptizer's warning in Luke 3:9 still applies, "**The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**" Confess your sin—you have not trusted God with all your heart. Confess who you are: a sinner. And rejoice. Your sins are forgiven. **Do not fear, Zion, the Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He takes great delight in you and rejoices over you with singing** (Zephaniah 3:16-17). Rejoice in the one who rejoices over you! This joy isn't just thinking happy thoughts and trying to ignore all the bad. This not being anxious about life isn't acting like nothing matters. It comes from the peace of God, which transcends all understanding that will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice because you have seen this peace. This is peace that came to earth on a night when an army of angels cry out, "Glory to God in the highest!" and shepherds run into Bethlehem to see the face of peace. It's peace that comes from one who is greater than John the Baptizer and baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. We have peace because God did not make it any easier for his own Son while he was on this earth. This true God and also true man Jesus knows the attacking enemies that try to rob you of joy and peace. He's felt them too. He shared in our weaknesses and was tempted like us. But where we have fallen into temptation, Jesus defeated it. Where we have worried and doubted, Jesus trusts his Father's will. Where we fail, Jesus prevails. He was pierced,

crushed, and punished for our sins on that cross. And so we have peace because God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. This also means that God is going to give us every good thing. So be at peace and have no doubt in your mind. After all, death has been defeated with Jesus rising from the dead. After all, Jesus has returned to the Father in heaven where he has a place waiting for you with him. After all, he rules with all power and authority over all things for our good. After all, he is coming soon to bring you to be with him. All your present struggles and difficulties that are very real and hard right now will be a far distant memory after Jesus wipes every tear from your eye. So we can have peace, because that's what Jesus gives us and leaves us. God is on your side. Since he is for us, who can be against us? It's not about your protecting him; God is your refuge and strength and he is near. He's near because Jesus is coming again soon. He's near because he promises he never will leave you or forsake. God is here. He hears your prayers and answers them. He gives you his body and blood in the Lord's Supper to strengthen you. He points you back to your baptism to remind you that you are God's dearly loved child who takes great delight in you and rejoices over you.

Worldly speaking, we should be anxious about tomorrow and life in this world because we don't know what's going to happen. But Jesus' peace surpasses our understanding and reasoning. It guards us as he assures you he has it under control. Worldly speaking we need to make sure to defend ourselves and make sure we are right, or what's going to happen? Jesus' peace protects you, he's coming soon. He turns us from looking at ourselves and instead look to serve your neighbor. Forgive as Jesus has forgiven you. Leave it in his hands. Worldly speaking this world can be downright depressing. It seems more like you really need to dig to find something joyful. Jesus' peace guards us because at the end of the day even when life is filled with frustration and struggle and this and that, I'm still a forgiven baptized child of God who is on my side who promises that he will not let anything separate me from his love. So rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be known to all so they too might know Jesus' peace. Don't be anxious about anything. Take everything, whether big or small or in between, to God's throne with thanksgiving. He hears you and answers in his way in his timing for your good. Do not fear, you have God's protecting peace. Amen.