

Series: Finding Joy

Title: Joy in the Church

Text: Philippians 4:1-5

Date: November 6, 2022

Verse 1

Philippians 4:1 marked a transition in Paul's letter. The apostle turned to talk about practical matters. In particular, he aimed to address a conflict between two women within the church — "Euodia and Syntyche" (Philippians 4:2). Additionally, he wanted to thank the church for its generous financial contribution to his mission work in Jerusalem (Philippians 4:10-20).

Before discussing such practical matters, Paul reminded his readers of their standing in Christ. He said, "So then, my dearly loved and longed for brothers and sisters, my joy and crown, in this manner stand firm in the Lord, dear friends" (Philippians 4:1). The words rendered "so then" were ones that have often been translated "therefore" or "wherefore" by English translations. In the original Greek, Paul used a term that drew a logical conclusion based on previously stated realities. His intent was to make application concerning what he said about the prospect of glorification in Philippians 3:20-21. On the basis of the glorious hope of Christ, he urged his readers to pursue oneness in Christ.

Paul's words in Philippians 4:1 contained six different descriptors of the believers in Philippi. They also contained one admonition ("stand firm"). As for the descriptors, each was designed to remind believers of their standing in Christ. Paul knew the cure to the relational realities in Philippi was found the gospel. If the church would remember its identity in Christ, souls would be moved to pursue Christian unity.

As to the first descriptor, Paul called his readers "dearly loved." The language conveyed Christians as being united with God and each other in the bonds of holy, Christian charity. As ones who had experienced the love of God via Christ (John 3:16), the true believers at Philippi were called to live lives of love (Matthew 22:37-40). Paul wanted his readers to remember that love was to be a foremost priority amongst the body (1 Corinthians 13:13). He would have agreed with Peter's instruction: "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

In calling his readers to love, Paul professed that he himself had a fervent love for the church. He said he "longed for" the believers at Philippi. The underlying Greek language of modern translations was used to speak of one yearning or earnestly desiring another person.¹ Paul's passion for the Philippians was seen earlier in the letter, as he described his yearning to visit the church (Philippians 2:24). The apostle's appeals for Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord weren't empty of personal commitment. Paul himself had learned to cultivate an abiding love for the body of Christ.

After appealing to love, Paul addressed his readers as "brothers and sisters." The terminology was used of real familial relationships in the first-century world. Applied to the body of Christ, the terms depicted the intimate bond that exists between

¹ Zodhiates, 633.

Christians. Because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, believers share a spiritual connection with one another. Because of Christ, they have a tie that is stronger than blood kinship. Jesus spoke of such realities, saying, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50). In his letter to the Romans, Paul indicated all believers share a similar spiritual heritage, saying, “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Romans 8:29). As some in Philippi struggled to get along, Paul wanted them to remember their union in Christ.

Paul’s fourth descriptor called the Philippians his “joy.” The word indicated that the Philippians were a source of joy for the apostle. As he sat imprisoned in Rome, both hands chained to members of the Roman Praetorian Guard, Paul sensed deep happiness by thinking about the church at Philippi (Acts 16:6-40). The Lord had used him to lead a number of people to Christ and to establish a congregation in the Roman trade city. When Epaproditus delivered news about the church (Philippians 2:25-30), along with a financial gift from the church (Philippians 4:10-20), Paul was surely overjoyed to hear of the spiritual progress of the people he loved. Such “joy” was a constant theme in Paul’s letter for a reason (Philippians 1:4, 25; 2:2, 29). He wanted the divided to know that they could find a sense of godly happiness through the body of Christ.

Fifth, Paul called the Philippians his “crown.” The language was literally used in the ancient world as a reference to the physical awards given to athletes in the Roman games. Paul implemented the term in a figurative fashion. He did something similar in 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20. His intent was to depict believers as the reward for his labor in ministry. In a healthy way, he regarded the congregation as just recompense for all of his sufferings and effort in gospel advancement. Like John (3 John 4), Paul derived great satisfaction from seeing others standing strong in truth. The believers at Philippi were his “pride and joy” in a sense.

Lastly, Paul called his readers “dear friends.” The label referred to the close kinship shared by believers. In the original language of the New Testament, the title (agapētós) was built on the Greek word agápē. One has said it portrayed Christians as being “...united with God or with each other in the bonds of holy love.”² Because of Christ, the believers in Philippi had good reason to shun the divisive doctrines and schismatic divisions in their midst.

On top of the six descriptors Paul used of the Philippians, he also called them to action. He said, “stand firm” in the Lord. The verbiage of the text evoked imagery of a person or group demonstrating stability.³ Paul wanted the Philippians to demonstrate stability in regard to pure doctrine and fervent Christian love. Portions of his letter reveal that, as one has said, the church was “tempted to defection.”⁴ Though the church at Philippi was relatively strong, it was unstable to a degree. Such instability was the result of both doctrinal (Philippians 3:12-19) and practical (Philippians 2:3; 4:2)

² Zodhiates, 67.

³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 356.

⁴ Robertson, 458.

problems. Paul called the church to hold on to Christ. By anchoring themselves in the gospel, they could stand strong and persevere. They could exhibit a strong commitment to Christian doctrine and duty by finding strength in Christ.

Paul's words are relevant to the contemporary church. Sectarian divisions and unscriptural doctrines harm many congregations. When the body is disjointed by such things, the mission of Christ is compromised. The lamp stand of the church does not shine as it ought. Many times, the remedy is the same as it was for the believers in Philippi. Doctrinal and interpersonal woes can be healed by Christian love and Christian truth. When believers regard one another through the descriptors Paul used in Philippians 4:1, and when they decidedly take a stand for the Christian faith, the church can experience healing and health.

Verse 2

After making an appeal to gospel love and steadfastness in verse 1, Paul said, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). The word rendered "urge" was a strong one in the Koine Greek language. It conveyed the act of begging or beseeching.⁵ To us, it may seem strange that Paul would use such intense language. However, the tone of his writing indicated that he knew the two women well. Maybe he met them in his initial church-planting journey to Philippi (Acts 16:6-40).

Whatever the case, the two women — Euodia and Synthyche — apparently had some sort of sharp disagreement. It seems factions were forming within the fellowship, taking sides with the two women. Many different possible explanations have been offered concerning the nature of the division between the two women. Some see the spat as little more than a rather innocent disagreement between two headstrong Christian women who were zealous about their work for the Lord.

Others propose that the two hosted private Christian assemblies in their homes throughout the week. Such was common in the early church. In fact, the church at Philippi had experience with such home meetings during Paul's first visit to the city (Acts 16:15, 40). Perhaps the different meetings at Euodia and Syntyche's homes generated a sort of religious rivalry.

The exact nature of the quarrel between the two women in view is lost on us. We are only left to speculation. What's important for us is that Paul told them to "agree in the Lord." The original language used verbiage that strictly meant "to be of the same mind" or "to think the same thing."⁶ One author has described the activity by saying it "sets the good of the church above personal interest, and finds its inspiration in the lowliness of the incarnate Lord and the standard he expects of his people."⁷ It is for good reason that Paul used the same verb on multiple occasions in his letter to the Philippians (Philippians 1:7; 2:2, 5; 3:15, 19; 4:10). The apostle knew the church needed to cultivate a likemindedness in the Lord.

Paul's admonition for agreement was congruent with his call for the church to "stand firm" in the previous verse (Philippians 4:1). Apparently, thought processes,

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 456.

⁶ Zodhiates, 1454.

⁷ Martin, 172.

agendas, and opinions within the church had created an unhealthy sense of division. Earlier in his letter, Paul told the church, "... make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose" (Philippians 2:2).

From reading between the lines of Paul's letter, it seems the church was schismatic in two regards. First, some within the assembly were peddling a Christian message that was different than the one that came from the Lord and His apostles. It boasted of Christian perfectionism through the Ceremonial Law (Philippians 3:1-19). In addition, it seems there were some who weren't committed to gospel proclamation. Earlier in his letter, Paul called the church to contend "together for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:7).

Again the exact reason for the controversy between Euodia and Syntyche is unknown. What we do know is that there were differing degrees of division within the congregation in regard to both the church's doctrine and mission. Paul showed the path to unity by saying, "agree *in the Lord*." The phrase "in the Lord" was significant. It revealed the true means by which oneness is built in the church. Some congregations have "unity" that isn't built on the gospel. It is little more than a cultural, socio-economic, or political oneness. Some believers find common ground through cultural factors, personality compatibility, peculiar doctrines, and other earthly matters. To have God-honoring and biblical unity, churches must seek unity "*in the Lord*."

Paul was not interested in cultish mind control amongst the membership at Philippi. He called for unity, but he didn't not call for uniformity. He knew that true unity will not suppress expressions of diversity. Real Christian fellowship is built on the cross and Christ, not earthly factors. There is always room for differing opinions in the body of Christ. Individual believers won't see eye to eye on every matter; however, they can experience an otherworldly oneness by agreeing on the fundamentals of Christian doctrine and Christian mission. Paul held up such things as a balm to heal the hurt between Euodia and Syntyche. Instead of dividing concerning preferences, personalities, and pet agendas, the church at Philippi needed to rally behind the truth and mission of Christ.

Verse 3

Paul continued his instruction concerning the division at Philippi by saying, "Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3). His words were addressed to one identified as "true partner." We have no way of knowing who the individual in view was. Some propose that it was none other than Lydia, the businesswoman who was converted and Paul's first missionary visit to Philippi (Acts 16:14), and who later proved to be helpful in the establishment of the church (Acts 16:40). Others claim the "true partner" was Epaphroditus, the church member who had travelled from Philippi, delivering news to Paul (Philippians 2:25-30).⁸ Though the man would actually deliver Paul's letter to the church, he would hear the instructions of verse 3 as the letter was read out loud on the

⁸ Robertson, 458.

Lord's Day. On top of these explanations, some claim Luke was the "true partner."⁹ Others explain that the Greek word underlying English translations was simply a proper name — "Syngus."¹⁰

While the exact identity of the individual in view may escape us, we can be assured that the person was a cherished helper for Paul. Ancient documents reveal that the word rendered "partner" was often used of the bonds of marriage.¹¹ In addition, it was sometimes used of two animals who were yoked together. Paul's intent was to figuratively depict a ministry counterpart who was of great help and support. One has said his language depicted the subject in view as a "true comrade" and "genuine fellow worker" in gospel work.¹²

Paul further described the nature of his Christian helper by calling the individual "true." The language meant "genuine" or "sincere." It spoke of the person's motives in ministry. The apostle likely spoke of such things to hold the worker up as a contrast to individuals like Euodia and Syntyche. While those two women were fighting for prominence and prestige at Philippi, others were more true in their intentions. The membership at large needed to aim for a similar sincerity in gospel ministry.

Paul asked his unidentified counterpart to "help" the "women" mentioned in verse two. His language conveyed the idea of one "taking hold" of a person or thing.¹³ It was used in the first-century world to depict a fisherman catching a fish, or an authority imprisoning a criminal.¹⁴ Used figuratively by Paul, the term depicted one seizing another person in order to provide help. Euodia and Syntyche desperately needed help and Paul hoped that his "true partner" would come alongside them and provide assistance.

It is interesting to note Paul's words concerning how Euodia and Syntyche had once "contended" by his "side" for "the gospel." The word rendered "contended" is one that was often used in a negative way to speak of a sharp disagreement. It was a compound word that contained the word from which we get our "athletics." Within the military word, it was often used of soldiers fighting side by side against a common enemy. The apostle used the term earlier in Philippians to say, "Just one thing: As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, in one accord, *contending together* for the faith of the gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

Perhaps Paul used a play on words. Instead of fighting against one another, Euodia and Syntyche need to fight alongside one another for the sake of the gospel. Paul's words revealed a key to church unity. By aligning themselves with the mission of the church (Matthew 28:18-20), church members often see a decrease in the petty

⁹ Martin, 173.

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 457.

¹¹ Zodhiates, 1323.

¹² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 360.

¹³ Robertson, 458.

¹⁴ Zodhiates, 1325.

squabbles that often divide congregations. The devil often wreaks havoc on the church by deceiving members regarding the identity of their true enemy (Ephesians 6:12). Instead of fighting against one another, individual believers should fight alongside one another for gospel advancement.

In his appeal regarding Euodia and Syntyche, Paul mentioned one named “Clement.” He also mentioned “the rest” of his “coworkers.” “Clement” was likely some sort of ministry associate of Paul. Some think the man eventually became the bishop of Rome. Such a conclusion is based on archaeological records that give account of a bishop with the same name in that city. It is worth noting that “Clement” was a rather popular name in the first-century Roman world; consequently, it is hard to prove the exact identity of the individual in our text. Perhaps he was a deacon or pastor at Philippi.

Whatever the case, Clement and other “coworkers” were to join in assisting Paul’s “true partner” in easing tensions between Euodia and Syntyche. Paul used the title translated “coworkers” earlier in his letter when speaking of Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). In the original language, the term literally meant “together workers.” Paul’s frequent use of the term was a reminder of the need for fellowship in gospel ministry. Those who were divided needed to remember Christ’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

Paul made another appeal to unity at the end of verse 3. He reminded his readers that all of the characters mentioned in verses 2 and 3 were ones who had their “names” in “the book of life.” The book in view is referenced elsewhere in Scripture. According to Jewish tradition, the volume contained the names of all of God’s people (Exodus 32:32). In the book of Revelation, we are told that the names of all of the redeemed were transcribed in the volume before human history began (Revelation 20:11-15).

Whether there is actually a literal book in heaven containing the name of every believer, or whether the concept is simply a metaphor for God’s knowledge of those who are truly saved, we cannot say conclusively. However, we do know that God knows those who belong to Him. In addition, He will keep such ones secure in salvation. Concerning such things, Jesus said, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:28-30). Paul appealed to the reality of God’s eternal salvation as a grounds for Christian unity. Since their names were inscribed in the Book of Life, the members of the church at Philippi — Euodia, Syntyche, the “true partner,” Clement, and the other coworkers — were all obliged to get along and work together for the sake of gospel advancement.

Verse 4

Paul continued his appeal for church health in Philippi by saying, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). The word translated “rejoice” simply meant “be glad” or “be delighted.”¹⁵ It depicted a state of emotional happiness

¹⁵ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 406.

and well being.¹⁶ In the original language, Paul's words were issued as a command (imperative mood) that called for a continual action.¹⁷ Contrary to the opinion of some, feelings of "happiness" are not unspiritual or "un-Christian." In fact, Jesus used a Greek word that simply meant "happy" on multiple occasions when commending Christian virtue in His famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-11).

When it comes to joy and happiness, the crux of the issue is that one finds happiness in the right source. There is a worldly type of happiness that is based on earthly things, and there is a godly type of happiness that is based on eternal things. Jesus is the source of true joy. That's why Paul admonished the Philippians to "rejoice *in the Lord*." Paul himself gave testimony of how he experienced this form of happiness (cf. 1:18 and 2:17-18, and 4:10), and he wanted the believers at Philippi to experience it as well (cf. 1:26, 2:28, and 3:1). He emphasized the same idea in the third chapter when he said, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice *in the Lord*" (Philippians 3:1).

Philippians is often referred to as "The Epistle of Joy" because of Paul's emphasis on rejoicing. Notice from 4:4 that he wanted his readers to "Rejoice in the Lord *always*." The Greek word underlying the translation "always" depicted a continuous action.¹⁸ It meant "at all times" or "on every occasion."¹⁹ Christ-centered contentment is to be the consistent mark of Christ's children (1 Timothy 6:6). In addition, it is not dependent upon circumstances. Believers can be happy at all times and no matter what, even when they "go through the darkest valley" (Psalm 23:4). The reason for this is found in the fact that Christian joy isn't based on circumstances; rather, it is based on the realities of Christ.

To make sure that his readers understood his point, Paul repeated his admonition. He said, "I will say it again: Rejoice" (Philippians 4:4b). The phrase "I will say" contained an air of authority. It referred to one giving an "order" or "instruction" to a subordinate. It has often been said that repetition is the key to learning. It is for this reason that Paul employed so much repetition when writing to the church at Philippi. On three different occasions he instructed them to "rejoice" (Philippians 3:1 and 4:4).

Paul likely repeated his emphasis because of the discouragements in the church at Philippi. Divisive doctrines (Philippians 3:1-11), disunity among church members (Philippians 4:1-3), and poverty amongst some families (Philippians 4:10, 19; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2) were squelching joy in the congregation. Paul wanted the church to cheer up, and he knew Jesus was the sure source for such joy.

Many modern believers are in the same predicament of the first-century believers at Philippi. They are deficient in true joy and happiness. A large part of their problem is that they look for fulfillment in all the wrong things — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). To experience greater degrees of happiness, believers must seek satisfaction of the soul in the right types of

¹⁶ Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 457.

¹⁸ Zodhiates, 1094.

¹⁹ Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

things — the Lord, His kingdom, His gospel, and His mission. When one does so, one discovers that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

Verse 5

In Philippians 4:5, Paul said, “Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” The word rendered “graciousness” referred to a kind, gentle, and forbearing disposition.²⁰ The person marked by such an attitude was thought to have a special degree of selflessness.²¹ Such a person was thought to be fair and equitable.²² One has called the character trait “sweet reasonableness.”²³ The virtue involved inner-character from Christ that kindly handled life’s affairs and interactions with selflessness and graciousness. Another has defined the attribute by saying, “The word signifies a humble, patient steadfastness which is able to submit to injustice, disgrace, and maltreatment without hatred and malice, trusting in God in spite of it all.”²⁴

James used the same word translated “graciousness” from Philippians 4:5. In his writings, he told of how such a disposition flows in one’s life from godly wisdom: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense” (James 3:17). Such graciousness was undoubtedly needed at Philippi. Considering the infighting in the church (Philippians 2:1-4; 4:1-3), individual believers needed to live by “the wisdom from above.”

The Septuagint used the same language from Philippians 4:5 in the eighty-sixth Psalm. It depicted the Psalmist as saying, “For you, Lord, are kind and ready to forgive, abounding in faithful love to all who call on you” (Psalm 86:5). Because of God’s forgiving nature, His children should be quick to forgive as well. Instead of fighting and defending themselves, the Philippians needed to exhibit gentleness and forbearance toward one another. Those who were quick to hold grudges needed to meditate on the benevolent nature of the Lord.

²⁰ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller,

²¹ Melick, [CD-Rom].

²² Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

²³ Robertson, ?.

²⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 457.