“The Peace of God,” Philippians 4:2-9 (Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 18, 2024)

**2**I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. **3**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.

**4**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. **5**Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; **6**do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**8**Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. **9**What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

We are wrapping up our series in the book of Philippians. We have two more sermons in the series, today’s and the one next week. And these last two sermons should be very practical. The apostle Paul, who wrote the book of Philippians, wrote his letters in a particular way. In the first half of his letters, he typically covers doctrine: “This is what you should believe about Jesus Christ.” It’s true of the first half of Colossians, Ephesians, and, of course, Philippians. Then, in the second half of those letters, Paul covers practice: “This is how you should live in light of what you believe about Jesus Christ.”

And here’s how we’ll break down our study this morning of these very practical verses 2-9 of chapter four: *first, I’ll point out five commands from Paul* (these are not all the commands in these verses, but five of them).  *Second, one reality that makes obedience to the commands possible.* *Third, a promise that follows obedience.*

First, five commands for Christians from Paul. One of the things I notice as I work through the commands Paul gives in these verses (and elsewhere in his letters) is how unusual they are. Paul commands things of the church in Philippi that you just don’t get commanded to do anywhere else in life.

When I think of a “command” I think of something like “brush your teeth,” or “eat your vegetables,” or “fire your weapon that way.”  
  
But Paul’s commands are altogether different. They are commands that at first seem impossible, but you’d love if you could keep them. *First, he commands Christians to be joyful.* Wouldn’t you want to be able to obey that command? Verse 4: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” It’s unusual to command someone to rejoice. For example, I’m sure there were times I wanted my children to rejoice in how blessed they were, the fact that they had two loving parents and had all their needs met, but I’m pretty sure that even in my worst moments as a father I knew a command like that would be counterproductive.

But here’s Paul commanding that Christians rejoice. Now, we’ll talk about how to obey these commands later on in the sermon. But for now, let’s simply reflect on them.

When Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always, I say again rejoice,” he’s not saying that Christians can never be sad. Our Lord is Jesus Christ, and he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Paul himself commands us in Romans 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

I’ve met some people who think that if you found out your child was in a car accident, they were airlifted to Memphis, and the doctor says, “I don’t think she’s going to make it,” you should right there in the emergency room start singing the happiest Christian songs you know because Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” That’s not what Paul’s talking about. That kind of behavior would be psychotic.

What does it mean? It means that when times are good, rejoice in the Lord because he’s sovereign over everything and he’s given you these blessings. And when times are bad, when you weep and mourn because something precious has been taken away from you, you can still find some place in your broken heart to rejoice because you trust that God is working, he hasn’t abandoned you, and he’ll never let you go. Romans 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

*Second, Paul commands Christians to be gentle.* Verse 5a: “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” The Greek word translated as “reasonableness” in the ESV is a notoriously difficult word to translate. The KJV has “moderation,” the ASV has “forbearance,” NASB has “gentle spirit,” and the NIV 1984 and NKJV has “gentleness.”

“Gentleness” probably comes the closest to what Paul’s communicating here. Christians are to be kind, patient, and considerate toward everyone, never harsh, sarcastic, loud, or rude, no matter how irritating or difficult they may be, and people can be incredibly irritating and difficult, can they not?

It’s not that Christians have to be doormats and let people walk all over them. Not at all. We do have certain hills on which we will die. Yet even as we stand our ground, we do so as gently as possible with all, especially the difficult.

*Third, Paul commands Christians to never worry.* Verse 6a: “Do not be anxious about anything …” People read this verse and frequently wonder, “Does Paul here teach that it’s a sin to worry?” I don’t think that’s a helpful way to frame the question. I’d instead phrase it like this: “Worry, anxiety, is always a product of sin.” If the world was world were perfect, if it wasn’t broken by sin and its consequences, we would never have cause for anxiety. If we weren’t sinners and we knew the love of God like Adam and Eve originally had in the Garden of Eden, if God’s love was real to us, like a garment wrapped around us we could touch, we would not worry.

I phrase the question like that because I don’t want someone who hears they just got laid off and they immediately and involuntarily felt a jolt of anxiety to, in addition, feel guilty because they think they just sinned.

Worry is a going to happen in a broken world. If you don’t find yourself worrying about the people in your life from time to time, that just means you don’t love them. If you never worry about your family and friends, you’re a sociopath.

But the command is not simply “don’t worry.” That’s what Stoics do. That’s what Buddhists aspire to do. Paul commands Christians to do something with their worry. *Fourth, Paul commands Christians to always pray.* Verse 6: “[D]o not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Paul repeats this in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, where he says, “[P]ray without ceasing …”

I’m not sure it’s helpful to call a flash of worry when you hear bad news a sin, ***but it is a sin to give into worry.*** By that I mean I do think it’s a sin when people allow their anxieties to churn inside of them, keep them up at night, they go and call ten different people to tell them their worries, yet never go to God in prayer and tell him about them and ask him for help. Psalm 55:22: “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.”

If worry is a “sin,” the way you repent is through prayer. Paul commands Christians to take their worries, go to God in prayer, and beg him, “Take these from me. I don’t want to worry over this stuff anymore. I know I don’t rule the world, and I can’t control my circumstances. I can’t keep the people I love from tearing up their lives with their own two hands. But, God, you can. I don’t have any power over them, but you do. Please help me and display your glory.”

*Fifth, Paul commands Christians to control their thoughts.* Verse 8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

There’s a lot of debate in the commentaries about precisely what were the “honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable” things Paul had in mind in verse 8, but what is clear is that Paul expects Christians to control their thought lives. 2 Corinthians 10:5: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.”

As with worry, I don’t know that it’s best to call every single stray evil thought that crosses your mind a “sin.” You know why? ***Because the devil and his demons put some of those thoughts there.*** If the devil put a thought in your mind, you’re not responsible for it.

But, as with worry, impure thoughts, evil thoughts, are always a product of sin, and the question becomes, “What are you going to do with the thoughts that you find flying around your brain?”

I don’t know if anyone else is like this, but one of the things I struggle when it comes to thoughts is arguing with other people in my head. I’ll be driving down the road or cutting the yard and find I’m doing this. Sometimes these are arguments I’ve already have, and I’m going over them to see how I could have performed better. Most of the times they are arguments I haven’t had, and may never have, but I’m anticipating what I would say if one started on this subject.

Some of these arguments I’ve had in my head hundreds of times, just rehearsing what I would say to win the debate and put this person in their place. And most of the time they never take place. I don’t know why I do this. Probably it’s an unhealthy desire I have to always be right. But I do know this: these thoughts aren’t honorable, just, pure, lovely, or commendable.

Maybe you can relate. Or maybe you can’t, but you do struggle with lustful thoughts, or jealous thoughts. You see someone’s house or car or clothes and say, “I want that.” When that happens, what do you do? You must find something else to think about.

In those moments, it’s a good idea to stop what you’re doing and pray. It might also be a good idea to read some Scripture, play some hymns on Spotify, or simply put your phone down and go for a walk in the park. But Paul says, “Fill your minds with good things. Think on them. Meditate on them.”

Those are five of the commands Paul gives (there are others), and these commands are all things that in our sane moments we want to keep. Who doesn’t want to rejoice more, worry less, be gentle, and think more often of only good things?

“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. **4**For everyone who has been born of God ***overcomes the world***.” 1 John 5:3-4a. These commands aren’t burdensome, in that “Oh, I have to carve out extra time and energy in my life to keep them.” No, these commands ***would be life*** if we could keep them. We would overcome the world if we obey them.

And while we can’t obey them perfectly in this fallen world, we can obey more than we do.

*Second, one reality that makes obedience to the commands possible.* Verses 2-3: **2**I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche [SIN-ti-key] to agree in the Lord. **3**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 was some dispute between two of the women at Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche. We don’t know what caused the rupture in their relationship. But I want to look at that phrase “fellow workers.” Paul uses this phrase a lot (about a dozen times) in the New Testament to refer to followers of Jesus.

Now if Christians are “fellow workers,” who then is our employer? Who owns the business? ***God does.*** What’s significant about that? Think about it like this.

Those of you who own a business, if your name is at the top of the letterhead or in the name of the business itself, then you want your company to succeed more than anyone else. No matter how big your business gets the people you employ are never as motivated to make sure the job is done well, done right, as you are.

If you’re the owner, you’re ultimately responsible for everything. You’re the one that works the hardest. It just can’t be that the people you hire work harder than you. The business will fall eventually fall apart if that’s the case.

It doesn’t matter if you’re on vacation or if it’s the middle of the night, if something goes wrong, if there’s a water leak in the building, you’ve got to make sure it’s taken care of. You know that no one is going to care about your business like you will, because ***when you are the owner, you are always on the clock.***

***But your workers do get off the clock.***They go home and when they do, they forget about the business. They don’t worry about the reputation of the business, nor will they worry about the quality of the work done. They won’t worry about anything above their pay grade. A worker just shows up on time and does what his employer tells him to do.

Now, let’s apply this truth: if God is the owner, and we are the workers, *then we should learn to live like workers*.

As Christians, we have work to do. We must apply ourselves to the tasks God has given us. ***But in our lives, we’re just workers! And we must never take the burden of being an owner upon ourselves by thinking we are responsible for how the business of our lives turns out, because our lives don’t really belong to us anymore.*** As 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a: “You are not your own, **20**for you were bought with a price.”

If God is the one in control of your life, if he is the one who has bought you, if everything about you belongs to him, then he is the one responsible for how your life turns out.

And so you can relax, and to the degree we relax and just do what God has assigned us to do we will be able to keep Paul’s commands.

This where we mess up as Christians. We forget that God is the owner, and instead we are constantly tempted every day to slip back into thinking that we own our lives and that we are responsible for how our lives to out. We slip back into being owners, as if it’s up to us ultimately to produce children who love the Lord, instead of realizing it’s our job to love and teach our children, but that God is the one who changes hearts. That’s his job.

We slip back into being owners, as if it’s up to these freshmen at Ole Miss to know right now what they are going to do with their lives, instead of simply going to class this first semester and studying and applying themselves, forgetting that it’s God who directs our ways. That’s Proverbs 16:9, “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

When we slip back into being owners, thinking it’s all up to us to provide financially for ourselves, instead of simply going to work, putting in a full day’s effort, and trusting that God will somehow through our work (and sometimes in spite of our work) provide for our daily bread as he promises us over and over again in the Scriptures.

We are workers, not owners. We are renters of this life, not owners. But when we slip back into the mindset of being an owner, that’s when we break the commands Paul gives in Philippians 4.

But when we see that we are just workers, ***then will obey. We will be gentle with one another.*** Why do we typically get angry? Because our lives aren’t going the way we think they should. Our plans get frustrated, or we get interrupted, or people let us down, so we get irritable and angry.

But when we do that we forget we are not responsible for our lives. We are not owners; we are just workers. It’s foolish to get angry when I’ve been inconvenienced or offended or when I’ve been interrupted and my plans go awry through no fault of my own *because it’s not my life.*

If you truly believed you’re just a worker, *then why would you ever be anxious again*? Workers don’t worry about having what they need to do their job, they don’t worry about supplies or tools or competition from other businesses. They just show up and do the work.

Workers might be worried about getting laid off, but Christians will never get laid off. We’ll always have work to do. There’s always someone to love, somewhere to serve, or something to pray about, and our only responsibility is to continue laboring in the vineyard of the Lord until he returns.

If we remember we are workers, we will pray. I mean, my goodness, if workers are not afraid to ask their bosses for tools they need at the job site, then certainly we can go to God with our petitions and requests in order to better do his will. “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.” 2 Corinthians 9:8. ***Friends, you can be absolutely certain that you will have everything you need to accomplish God’s will in your life, because God never calls you to do something without equipping you to do so.***

And finally we will rejoice in the Lord always. Look at what he’s done for us. I love Ephesians 2:13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” We were once so far away from God, so separated from him by our sins, destined for for hell because we have offended our holy, righteous Creator God. But God loved us so much that he brought us near by the blood of Christ. On the cross Jesus Christ took our place under the wrath of God, and because Jesus took the blame we now receive nothing but love from God forever. That is a cause for rejoicing always.

Third, the promise that follows obedience. Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

This verse promises that no matter what happens, no matter how bad life might get, *you will have peace*. When strife and turmoil and disaster strike, your heart can be at rest because the supernatural, transcendent, peace of God, so powerful it surpasses understanding, will be given you.

Many of you know the story of Jim Elliot, and how he and four other missionaries in Ecuador were martyred as they tried to share the gospel with a tribe of Indians who at that time were still living in the Stone Age. But when Elliot’s widow, Elisabeth, first heard the news that Jim was missing, she says that the Lord immediately brought to her mind a verse. It was Isaiah 42:3: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

And she said she knew in that moment the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. By all outward reckoning she should not have been able to function, but she said her heart was at rest. And while she still grieved and mourned her husband’s death, she was able not only stay in Ecuador when all the other missionaries left but a few years later she and her three-year-old daughter moved into the jungle to live with the very tribe that killed her husband, in order to share the gospel with them.

How could she do that? *The peace of God*. She knew her life was not her own, that she was just a worker in God’s field, so she was willing to go wherever God would lead her confident that God would give her precisely what she needed to do his work.

Friends, if you’ll remember that for yourself, you can also know the peace of God. And the hymn based on Isaiah 42 will be precious to you: “When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine. The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes; that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.” PRAY