

Experiencing the God of Peace

Philippians 4:8-9

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Scripture

Philippians 4:8-9

[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.

Let's Pray

Introduction

How many of you have ever heard the phrase **self-sabotage**? According to dictionary.com, it's defined this way: ***The act or habit of behaving in a way that interferes directly with one's own goals, well-being, or relationships.***

So for example:

You really want to be a person who maintains a consistent 8-hour sleep schedule. However, you regularly consume 4-5 energy drinks a day, and you junk out on a lot of screen time right before bed. Do you think you're likely to get a solid 8 hours of sleep? Probably not. Instead, you will have spiked your cortisol levels, which means you will likely feel awake and anxious.

You are trying to save for a family vacation, so every month, you decide to set aside \$200. However, the problem is that most months, you end up eating out a lot, forcing you to use the \$200 for the vacation to cover other expenses, such as utilities. Will you ever be able to go on that family vacation? No, because while you have part of the equation right by saving the money, you are not making the necessary changes in other areas to keep it intact.

If we are all honest, we have probably been guilty of some kind of self-sabotage in our lives. We have goals that we want to pursue that would be good for us, but we are unwilling to make all of the changes necessary to achieve them.

This can also be true in our relationship with God.

Last week, in Philippians 4:4-7 we talked about being people who **Live as if Jesus is coming back**. According to Paul, this involves actively **rejoicing in the Lord**, **living with a gentle spirit**, and **casting our cares on Christ through prayer**.

All of this then culminates with a promise in verse 7:

[7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Which is great! Because who doesn't want the peace of God, right?

But there's a problem. Verses 4-7 only give us half of the answer for we experience the peace and the joy that God provides.

This means that we could walk away from that sermon thinking: "Okay, if I read God's Word, if I try to serve people, and I pray, then I will experience God's peace and his joy in my life."

Now, to be clear, those things are all good and necessary, so be sure to do them more and more.

But they don't perfectly encapsulate everything that is needed to experience the peace and joy that we talked about last week.

Because our experience of God's peace and joy also requires us to take seriously how we **think and live on a daily basis**.

So this morning, Paul is going to challenge our thinking and our practice. In verse 8, he will give us a holistic picture of how to set our thoughts on Christ-honoring realities as we live in this world.

Then, in verse 9, he will once again use himself as an example of how godly thinking leads to godly living or practice.

And to make sure that we see how our thinking and practice relate to the peace of God and our joy, he will end with another promise: **And the God of peace will be with you.**

But before we begin, I want you to know that I will spend about 80% of this sermon talking about verse 8 and our thinking. There are two reasons for this:

One, we all know that in general, what we think is what we become. Which means that our thoughts heavily affect how we live.

Two, we have already talked about imitating Paul and people like him in this series, so I don't need to say as much about that.

However, in verse 9, Paul will bring us back to the gospel as our foundation for godly thinking and living, and we will see how godly examples help us to put our thinking into practice.

So let's jump in and begin to see how Paul wants us to think on and ponder the Christ-honoring realities around us.

Ponder the things of God

Philippians 4:8

[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.

As we look at this list of words in verse 8, we need to note that they are not commonly found in the writings of Paul. In fact, three of the words, including lovely, admirable, and excellence, are only found here, and the rest are used infrequently.

This is probably because Paul has taken them “**lists of virtues**” that were common in Roman society. So when he tells them to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable, he is asking them to ponder these things as they see them within their own Roman culture.

But to be clear, Paul isn't telling them to do this so they will become virtuous or moral people. Rather, when we go back to the beginning of this letter, we see that he wants them to think about their world in light of who God is so they can know and experience him more.

Look with me at Philippians 1:9-11:

[9] And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, [10] so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, [11] filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

The knowledge that Paul has in mind in verse 9 is the knowledge of our Triune God. When we grow in our understanding of God, it will help us to discern what is excellent or best, and it will bear fruit in our lives.

Like I said at the beginning: what we focus on and think about will affect how we live and who we become.

So if we want to be people who experience the abundant life of joy and peace that Christ has for us, then our attention needs to be on the things in our world that actually point back to him.

Or as Paul says in Philippians 4:8, **the things that are excellent and worthy of praise.**

Because the truth is that we can't spend every moment of every day just reading and thinking about the Word of God. If we did, we would be hermits or monks, and that isn't how God has called us to live.

Instead, we have to live, work, and interact in a fallen and sinful world. And yet, because of God's grace and goodness, we get to interact in a world that still speaks of and points to him.

As Paul wrote in Romans 1:20:

[20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Therefore, Paul is telling us this morning to be a word-saturated, Holy Spirit-led, and prayer-focused people who seek to discern and ponder the realities of God that are still present in our world.

Realizing that, let's take a few minutes to look at the list of virtues from 4:8 so that we can better understand how we are called to see and savor God's nature and truth around us.

Application

The first virtue is truth,

"Whatever is true..."

For Paul, "whatever is true," is defined by what is in accordance with God and his Word. So when we look out in the world, we should be looking for the things that shine forth the character of God, as it has been revealed in scripture.

This can be hard, can it? We are confronted with messages every day that may be true, but also might be partially true or outright false. And if we aren't careful and discerning, we might fall into the trap of believing things that are either against God or give us a false picture of who he is and how he works in the world.

For instance, imagine that someone tells you that you shouldn't be a Christian because the God of the Bible is an angry God. Well, if you don't know your Bible and they show you a few stories where God is angry, then you might begin to think, "Maybe they're right. Why am I following this God?"

But if you know the scriptures, you know that God hates sin, and yes, at times, he is angry. However, he is also a God of love, grace, justice, and forgiveness, which is why he sent Jesus to die on the cross.

Think about our area. We live in a region with a lot of social services. Now, on the one hand, we should affirm these services as good when they are helping people to rid themselves of drug addiction or getting them to a place of sustainable living. **Because scripture tells us to value human lives and to care for the down and out.**

And yet, the heart and character of God are reflected when his creatures live out the creation mandate to work. So, we should be skeptical of organizations that are simply giving handouts and not helping the whole person.

What about media? Not a day goes by where we are not confronted with messages that are trying to sell us ideas that are contrary to the Word of God. Messages about sex, relationships, beauty, wealth, and happiness are training us to believe that worldly pleasure should be our highest goal and pursuit.

This means that we probably need to be careful about how much media we actually consume. Also, we need to be training ourselves and our kids to see those messages through the lens of what God says will bring true and lasting peace and pleasure.

The second virtue is honorable.

"Whatever is honorable..."

As we look at this virtue, I think we can add two others from the list that are very closely related. *Whatever is commendable and worthy of praise.*

Because all three are telling us to focus on people who have an upright character, a good reputation, and are worthy of respect.

I think this is one of the most counter-cultural and helpful things we can do as God's people. **Think about who gets elevated, respected, and admired in our society.**

Movie stars, musicians, athletes, and politicians, to name a few. But even in our own communities, who are those people? Very often, it's those with money, charisma, a platform, or power.

But just because someone has money or charisma or for some reason is well known, does that make them someone who is worthy of praise, honor, and respect? **Meaning, are they worth imitating? Not at all.**

In fact, very often, when we really look into the lives of people who do have a lot of money, power, and fame, we tend to find people who look polished on the outside but aren't very honorable in their actual conduct.

This is why God told Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7:

[7] ... “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

And if we elevate people like this, whether we realize it or not, we will begin to value the things they value. Things like lifestyle, money, influence, or platform will become the markers of true peace and joy in this life.

We will lose sight of the fact that whether we have a million dollars or a hundred dollars, what matters most to God is our heart and our character. **Because he wants us to be people who are spiritually mature and upright in character.**

Therefore, we should be looking to honor and even imitate those things that we see in others, both inside and outside the church, that embody godly and honorable character.

The third virtue is Justice

“Whatever is just...”

Now, in this instance of the word **just**, Paul isn't referring to the legal standing before God that belongs to believers through Christ. Rather, this word describes everything that conforms to his commands and perfect standard of what is right.

This is a virtue that I believe we so badly need to grow in as Christians. How many of us at times will question God's justice when it comes to sending people to hell? Or we will question his goodness and fairness when we see children starving in Africa?

And yet, we're not continually broken and disgusted by the destruction of life and the family that we see happening around us through things like abortion, addiction, and the sexual revolution. If we are honest, many of us have become all too comfortable with these realities because we are being desensitized to them through the media and cultural messaging we consume.

But how can we truly experience the peace of God when we feel so at home with the evil and destruction around us? Because David tells us in Psalm 34:14 that if we want peace, we need to turn away from evil. As he says:

***[14] Turn away from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.***

This leads right into our next virtue, which is purity.

“Whatever is pure...”

This requires us to focus on things that are morally blameless and to reject things that are impure. And in scripture, one of the easiest things to focus on is our need to flee from sexual impurity.

This means fleeing from pornography, adultery, and homosexuality. But it also means being watchful of what we look at and think about so we aren't consumed by the lusts of the flesh.

And yet, it goes beyond that. The idea of thinking about or pursuing purity should infiltrate every area of our mind, our words, and our actions. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:22:

[22] Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.

We are called to flee sin in all of its forms, and to do that, we need to fill our minds and hearts with the things in our world that are upright and morally good in God's eyes.

Because the fight for purity in the life of the Christian and the peace that flows from a life free from evil, begins in the mind and the heart. **It begins with what we think about. So we must consume ourselves with what is pure.**

Finally, the last virtue to focus on is lovely.

“Whatever is lovely...”

Now, this is the easiest of all the terms to misapply because its focus is on whatever causes pleasure and delight within our hearts.

But it's not meant to be a purely hedonistic call to go out and experience any and every kind of pleasure that the world has to offer. **That would mean Paul is contradicting everything else he is calling us to think about in this list.**

Rather, he wants us to take pleasure and delight in the things that are pointers to God. His beauty, goodness, and rightness.

A beautiful sunset, the budding trees, beautiful music, grand architecture, the smell of fresh baked goods or a good meal, a young man helping an old woman across the street, your spouse doing the hard work of providing for the family or working to educate and care for the kids, etc...

These lovely realities are all around and are meant to be enjoyed as they point us to Christ as the source of our ultimate joy and fulfillment.

So, these are the things that Paul wants us to look for, to consider, and to ponder in the world around us. He wants us to fill our minds and hearts with them so that we can truly experience the peace and the joy that God has for us in this life.

Because if we don't, we will be like the person chugging energy drinks while trying to get 8 hours of sleep. Or we will be like the family trying to save for vacation while overspending on eating out. **We will never get there, and we will probably become discouraged by the fact that we're not making any progress.**

But I also realize that this sermon might feel strange to you, because it's something that many of us are not used to hearing. Very often, when we talk about the world as Christians, we talk about it as something that should be rejected. **So then, the only place we can truly see and experience God is in his Word.**

However, if Psalm 19:1 is true, which says: “[1] ***The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork,***” then God has also revealed his beauty, brilliance, and majesty in his creation.

Now, that doesn't mean the Word of God isn't important; it is. It's how we know God, it's what teaches us about Christ and our new life in him, it's what God uses to grow our faith to direct us as his people, **and it is what helps us to see his goodness in the rest of his creation.**

But if you are not used to looking at the word this way, you might be asking, “How do I do that? How do I discern what is true, honorable, just, pure, etc...? Or how do I decide what I should be enjoying or avoiding as a Christian?”

Practice the things of God

Philippians 4:9

[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 where Paul takes the thinking and pondering and brings it to action. Whereas he told them to focus on these virtues that are excellent and praiseworthy in verse 8, he is now telling them to put into practice those same virtues, as they have learned, received, heard, and seen them in his life.

Paul is once again calling the Philippians and us to imitate his life, just like he did in Philippians 3:17. However, realizing we have already talked about this, I want to briefly touch on the 4 instructional words in verse 9, and how they relate to our practice of these virtues.

First, when Paul uses the words learned and received, he is talking about everything he has taught the Philippians as it relates to faith in Christ. In fact, the word “received” is often used in the New Testament in relation to believing the good news of the gospel.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4

[3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

This is important because it is a reminder that thinking about and practicing these virtues isn't about being a moral person, but it's about experiencing the God who has called us to a relationship with himself through his son Jesus Christ.

And if you are here this morning and you don't have a relationship with the God of the universe, I want to encourage you to come to him.

Realize that you are separated from him because of your sin and wrongdoing and are currently on a path that leads to a real and eternal place called hell. But God, being rich in mercy, sent his very own Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for all the wrong you have done.

And if you see your need of him and turn to him in faith, you can receive real and lasting forgiveness from God and the promise of a new and everlasting life with him. **One that is full of the joy and peace that we have been talking about this morning.**

If this is you, please come and talk with me after service, and I would love to help you experience this new life and relationship with God.

Secondly, when Paul uses the words “heard and seen”, it’s another reminder to the Philippians and to us that we need to be looking for living examples of Christ in our lives.

For the Philippians, this was people like Paul, Epaphroditus, and Timothy. But for us, though we can learn a lot from those men, I believe we also need to be looking to our brothers and sisters within the family of faith here at LEFC.

To those who know and love the truth of God’s Word. Who live honorably and with integrity, are worthy of respect, and have a good reputation. They pursue justice and purity in all areas of their life, and they know how to enjoy God’s creation as it points them to Jesus.

In fact, I would encourage you, if there is someone in your mind right now who loves Jesus and has this kind of godly character, be bold and ask them if you can spend some time with them and their families.

Observe them, listen to them, hear their stories, and learn from their wisdom, so you can put into practice what you have seen and heard from them as they continue to pursue Christ in all areas of their lives.

Conclusion

So yes, rejoice in the Lord, and let’s be a people who seek and experience God’s peace through prayer. But remember, this is only possible if we are working to set our hearts and minds on what is good and honoring to him and then putting those things into practice.

But like I said last week, we're not left to do this on our own. Because, on this journey of faith, we have the promise from Paul that the God of peace will be with us and in us.

And he will fill us with his joy, he will hear our prayers, he will guard our hearts and minds, and his present and everlasting peace will be upon us. **The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.**

Let’s pray.