

Rev. Seth D. Bode ‡ Sermon 455, 12-12-2021 ‡ Advent 3

"Lord God, you have appointed me as a pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all."

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.



What ingredients do you mix together as Christmas gets near? I couldn't believe my eyes when I came home and a 2-year-old was on the kitchen counter. His mom had him kneading the dough. Flour, water, sugar, it was all there. It all turned out safe ... and delicious. What ingredients do you have mixing as Christmas gets near? Joy? Gentleness? Prayer? Thanksgiving? Peace?

Of course spiritual ingredients are much more important than dough. They are essential to being Christian. The Christian is an optimist. The Son of God has solved the mystery to our life, the secret to our contentment, the Way to heaven, the Truth, and the Life, and the reason to love one another. The binding ingredient is always grace.

WHEN THE LORD COMES NEAR, HE GIVES JOY AND PEACE

1. Joy Paul was in prison and said to rejoice. He said it multiple times by chapter four. Now he says to rejoice "always" and he goes on to say it twice. You don't really rejoice without freedom unless you know something else. Rejoice always and rejoice again.

But Paul doesn't make a case for giddiness or happiness without any basis; he makes the case for JOY. For Paul says "*rejoice in the Lord.*" Paul knows no other kind of joy. False teachers deviate from Christ, and therefore they rob whoever listens to them of joy. Yet since the Holy Spirit has glorified Christ in the hearts of believers, there is an endless well of joy that believers can draw out of at any moment. Joy has faith as its basis. Joy proceeds from faith, like a flourishing fruit.

Nothing can bring Christians to rejoice more than the Lord's nearness. "*The Lord is near.*" Paul doesn't say how near in place, and he doesn't say how near in time. Yet the Lord promises to be near (as in spatially close) to the one praying. See Psalm 145:18, "*The Lord is near to all who call on Him in truth.*" But the Lord is near in *time*, giving a good purpose to be gentle and rejoice.

There is an ingredient that doesn't mix. "*Do not worry.*" "Do not be anxious, troubled, be fretful." Worry does not mix with joy. If we could look back at life, totalling all our worries, and pile them on top of each other, it would form a great mountain. Worry is a lack of confidence and trust, and therefore a lack of joy. What a sin worry is! It keeps us from listening to God, from looking in His Word, from encouraging each other, and from talking to God, too.

But here Paul contrasts worry with prayer. Therein lies the solution to worry! Worry is a kind of anti-prayer. We put energy into things we cannot change and have no control over. But God doesn't tell us to simply cease worrying and pretend our feelings don't exist. He doesn't tell us to squash it like a lump of dough. Instead, He invites us to put those feelings and energy into praying to Him. Don't worry! Pray! Don't wonder what to pray about—Paul says, "*in everything.*" The Lord invites our prayers. He commands our prayers. He loves our prayers.

There are a few kinds of prayers Paul mentions, too. There is a generic term for prayer, but also a word for "petition" or "supplication," which is a word of requesting things from God. Then there is the word for the requests themselves. Then the prayer of thanksgiving! Here is an ingredient that DOES mix with joy. "*With thanksgiving.*" Notice that you need grace for joy, and you also need grace for thanksgiving. You can hardly ask for anything by grace without a solid dose of thanksgiving. Is it even a prayer without thanksgiving?

2. Peace “*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*” “Surpasses, goes beyond, excels, rises above, transcends.” The heart, not the mind, recognizes the transcendent. I recently listened to two renowned neurosurgeons discussing the mind and agreeing that there must be a God. Brain surgeons? Yes. They agreed the mind has not yet been pinpointed. Where is the human mind? One surgeon, Michael Egnor, said he has seen firsthand that the consciousness does not reside in the cortex; that is, the wrinkly gray part that forms much of the visible part of the brain. Egnor said he once took out more than half of a young woman’s brain while removing a tumor, and she never skipped a beat. She was normal before and after the surgery. Off the top of his head, Egnor offered about four other examples of people with brain removal who are still cognitive, still thinking, still mindful. Egnor takes all his experience as evidence that the human mind still defies all scientific explanation.

Think about how neuroscience is in its infancy, and brain surgeons find no peace opening up people’s heads. They can take apart the brain, yes. But they haven’t yet found the mind!

But those who eagerly await the Lord Jesus have found something. They have found peace. It is a peace that goes beyond the mind. It is a peace that is not of this world. Only the heart may recognize it. After all, what good is a god we thoroughly and completely understand? Such a god isn’t worth the effort to worship.

This is what we do understand: God has worked out peace in Christ Jesus, the greatest Gift of all. We understand He took our sins away. We do not know how that is possible except that He is perfect God, so His record can transfer to our account. Also He is frail human, so His blood could spill in our place. Also He is for us, so that our battle became His own. Also He had no help in this matter, so that He was born into our lowliness and humility. Also we were helpless, so that He must be born into our hearts by the work of the Spirit. This new birth gives us peace.

Your day may not go very well; but still, you will rejoice always and rejoice again, for Jesus gives you peace. You may feel sad when all the world round you says you should be happy, since your seasonal affective disorder sets in this time of year; but still, you will rejoice always and rejoice again, for Jesus gives you peace. You may think, as I do, about your grandpa’s death on Christmas Eve;

but still, you will rejoice always and rejoice again, for Jesus gives you peace. You may be cut to the heart by a relative who refuses to take your words in a kind way; but still, you will rejoice always and rejoice again, for Jesus gives you peace. Your friends at school may gossip about you; but still, you will rejoice always and rejoice again, for Jesus gives you peace. Old sins may try to haunt you, but if you remind yourself what Jesus has done; you will rejoice always and rejoice again, for His forgiveness gives you peace.

For you know Jesus, who has brought you a new heart and has settled your mind with the key ingredient; that is, grace. You couldn't have a settled conscience without it. The binding ingredient is always grace—God's Riches At Christ's Expense, God's undeserved love, His unearned favor. The Son of God faced incarnation and disaster and turmoil so your hearts and minds may be settled by faith in Him alone.

Rejoice always. Rejoice again. Rejoice in Jesus, Amen.