

**Advent 2017
Joy – in Christ
Philippians 4:1-7**

How many times, do you suppose, you have heard this year, “That’s what Christmas is all about,”? In what percentage of such claims did you hear a biblical focus attached to the idea? Very few, I would guess. Christmas, to many, is what the Bible is, or, what Jesus is to them – whatever they want it to be.

Within the next week, it is almost certain that someone from your family will be traveling. Either you will be traveling to be with grandparents or grandchildren, or they will be coming to see you. There may be nothing that brings you more joy than for blended families to be together – or – there may be little that causes you more angst than to have blended families together. Somewhere along the line someone may say, “Well, in *our* family, we all did it *another* way,” to which someone will be tempted to say, “Well, in *this* house, we do it *this* way.” If your goal is for everyone to be normal and on the same page, I would advise you to settle for another goal.

But, what about *this* family – you know, the church family? We live by a different set of rules, don’t we? No snippiness or bitterness or snide remarks here, correct? Well, it is designed that way, but having originated from another family – from Adam’s family – our old ways at times defeat our best efforts to get along as we should. The Christian life can be quite the challenge.

But, to think in terms of “How might I best live the Christian life?” is to focus on the form rather than the substance. It is focus on the law rather than the gospel. Some of you will have beautiful and respectable Christmas celebrations that are devoid of the deep love for which you long, while others of you will have what might only be

described as “messy” celebrations, but the love that permeates the family is never in question and deep down, that is more than enough.

This morning, with the advent candle of joy being lit and the focus of salvation that is made possible through Jesus’ first and yet to be second advent, it will not surprise you that we will land in the book of Philippians. Again – our focus is joy. Hey – wait a minute! That’s the wrong slide! Tony, could you change that, please? Okay, thanks. Our text is Philippians 4:1-7, but the topic is joy, and we will find it throughout all four chapters of Paul’s theologically rich thank you letter to his supporters. By the time we get to chapter 4, Paul has already made a plea for believers to live in selfless service toward one another. In our text, Paul encourages two women by name to live in unity with one another – in Christ. Philippians 4:1-7. Would you please stand for the reading of God’s Word?

1 Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. **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.

You will have no doubt noticed the phrase “in the Lord” in our passage because you pick up on those kinds of things. The Apostle

Paul wrote this letter to his friends in Philippi – from jail. The best guess is that Paul was under house arrest in Rome. In our day, prison carries a stigma. In ancient times, not only was great shame attached to prisoners, but suspicion was cast on those who would associate with prisoners, so whenever you see Paul thanking those who helped him in prison, it was a big deal!

You have heard that happiness is often based on the circumstances of one's life being favorable while joy is not determined by circumstances, but, rather, is based on a relationship with Jesus. As helpful and hopeful as that sounds, it is often tempting to think, "Well, that's nice, but I don't know what to do with it." I am not sure that the following thoughts will advance our attempt at having an eternal perspective in an ever-increasing "everything is about the moment" world, but the principles point to life-changing Scripture – and faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ. Let's take a few minutes to think about five ways that joy flourishes, even during the ups and downs of life. It occurs when your focus is on the gospel, or, on Jesus. These principles are in Philippians, often in multiple passages. Furthermore, you may be able to add several such principles from your own study of Philippians. The Scripture that will accompany each point may provide material for family devotions this week as you think about the joy of Jesus' first advent and the ways our relationship with him changes, not only our eternal destiny, but the also the shape of our daily lives, no matter the circumstances. Let's jump in with the first principle:

- 1. Good works may help you sleep at night, but the joyful assurance of eternal life only comes through trust in Jesus (Philippians 3:1-9; 2:5-8)**

When good people do good things – especially when they do good things for other people – this world is a better place. Would you agree? Absolutely! The difficulty comes when you realize that

Scripture teaches that there are no good people. Oh, we are made in the image of God and are fully capable of doing many wonderful things in this life, but in the end, either we are serving God, or we are serving ourselves. Hey, do not misunderstand – believers can serve themselves as readily and creatively as those who do not believe, and we can even add a spiritual twist, but as was emphasized in the Sola Series, in the end we are theologians of glory or theologians of the cross. As a theologian of glory, I seek to gain heaven by my good works, and my version of heaven may or may not contain a Creator God, but one way or the other I seek to make myself worthy of God, of the world, of my social network.

A theology of the cross, on the other hand, agrees that we were incapable of climbing up to God, but, thanks be to God, he came down from heaven and met us at the unlikeliest of places – at a Roman cross. Colossians 1:19-20 tells us that God reconciled us to himself by making peace with us through the blood of Jesus' cross. The message of the NT is that God's love for us was so great that he made a way for sinful men and women to be made right with the perfect Creator of the universe, and that way is through the cross. If you have been the best possible version of you that you could be and you still feel like you are not good enough to go to heaven when you die, there is good news for you! Jesus, the Son of God in flesh, lived a perfect life and died as your substitute so that you might be saved. Call out to Jesus – there is great joy in knowing him! So much so that the circumstances of life do not dictate the condition of your heart and mind, as the next point avers:

- 2. A life free from pain may bring you a measure of peace, but only in Christ will you find joyful fulfillment for your days on earth (Philippians 1:12-28; 3:10; 4:10-13)**

Remember, Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter that refers to joy and rejoicing over a dozen times. But because of Paul's focus

on his position in Christ, he was able to see beyond his circumstances and recognize that far from this being the disaster in his life that many thought it to be, his status as prisoner served to advance the gospel because every three hours a fresh guard was brought in to be chained up next to Paul. What do you suppose they talked about? In addition to seeing his suffering as a privilege for kingdom service, Paul also saw his suffering as a way to enter into Christ's sufferings at a level of communion that may well be impossible without the suffering. Philippians 3:10: "That I (Paul) may know him (Jesus) and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

Paul had said in Philippians 1:29 that suffering is God's call for all who believe in Jesus. In Philippians 2, there is some indication that Epaphroditus' illness was a demonic attack. At the very least, his illness was the result of the tireless kingdom service that he rendered to Paul. If you are dealing with a chronic illness, you may, indeed, be suffering for Christ. You may be ecstatic if/when you are no longer ill, but you will find true joy only in Christ, whether you get better or not. Third:

3. Personal failure may discourage you, but there is joy in knowing that he will complete what he has begun in you (Philippians 1:4-8; 2:12-13; 3:12-21)

You know Philippians 1:6, don't you? Paul said this to his friends: "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." That would be enough for the day, I am guessing, for some of you. What a beautiful promise! Not only will I be different, one day – I will be perfect! It is, indeed, true to say that I am a work in progress. But, it is not that I am making myself better and better, but that I am *in Christ* and he is the one who is changing me. Every time Paul challenged his readers to live up to their calling, he turned right around and

encouraged them with the truth that it was God who was changing them. Philippians 2:12-13: “12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Which would be easier for you to identify – your greatest joy in life or the greatest disappointment that you have with yourself? That’s easy for most of us! Even if you have no problem identifying your greatest joy, your own failures keep you from experiencing joy at the level you desire. Ah, but if your greatest joy is Jesus, then you can rest in his forgiveness of your sin and his promise to continue to mold you into his image, which is the focus of our next point:

4. Worldly pursuits may assist you in becoming a person of influence in the world, but pursuit of Jesus will produce peaceful and joyful spiritual maturity (Philippians 1:9-11; 3:8-10; 4:8-9)

Distracted. That is what I am most of the time. No joke – I have my head in this world. I keep up with the news and what thinkers are saying about what is happening in our world. Therefore, if you want to talk about what is going on, I can hang with you, for a bit, at least, and I like to think that I have some influence. I am called, though, to pursue Christ in Scripture and in prayer. That does not mean to be ignorant of my culture and surroundings, but it does mean that when Jesus saved me, he designed me to live as though I am *in him*.

To say that it is God who will do a work in me if I hope to improve is not meant to encourage a passive life. Life in Christ is anything but passive! We are to pursue Christ. Paul’s prayer for his friends in Philippians 1:9-11 was not focused on their physical health or work

or personal relationship but, rather, Paul prayed that their love would grow in knowledge and discernment so that they would produce spiritual fruit worthy of the gospel. One day, we will be presented pure and spotless before the Lord. We are called to pray and live as though we believe that day will come. **Philippians 4:5**, after all – the Lord is at hand! What does it look like to live in anticipation of Christ’s return? Our last point:

5. A life well-lived may produce self-satisfaction, but deep joy is only found in a cross-centered life (Philippians 2:5-8)

You absolutely need to protect your interests, right? If you don’t look out for yourself, no one else will. You treat people a certain way and you expect the same fair treatment. Indeed, I doubt you will be able to rest until your opponent is properly put in his or her place. And, you know, the more I think about it, maybe I do deserve the jacuzzi that I saw online the other day. Or, perhaps I should spend more time in one of the great Advent texts, **Philippians 2:5-8**: “**5** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Four times in **Philippians**, Paul says to follow someone’s example. He points to Jesus, to himself, to Timothy, and to Epaphroditus, and every time he is pointing to a selfless, Christ-centered, others’ centered focus. In other words, he is pointing to the cross. Consider what it means that Jesus left heaven to become human in the way that he did – born as a baby to a relatively poor family in occupied Israel. His entire life, he obeyed God’s law and was a servant to others. He even humbled himself to one of the most humiliating forms of public execution ever devised – crucifixion. Why did he do

it? Hebrews 12:2: Jesus endured the shame of the cross for the joy that was set before him. What was his joy? To obey his Father, no doubt, and to be restored to the glory he had before coming to earth, but surely Jesus' joy was also to fulfill God's plan for our forgiveness so that we could live eternally with him through his sacrifice.

When you have been mistreated, most likely you feel justified in righting the wrongs. Indeed, our God is a God of justice and we should seek justice wherever possible. But, even then, we should be concerned more about justice for others than for ourselves. We are called to live cross-centered lives. Philippians 2:5-8, of course, follows the first four verses of chapter 2 where Paul encouraged believers to die to their own interests and to consider others as more important than themselves. When is the last time you have considered someone else more important than you? When have you sacrificed your interests for theirs, and when have you done so with humility, without resentment or a plan to get even?

Perhaps the reason we fail to know full joy in this life is that we are so busy trying to be happy – and there is no happiness in a cross. It is equally true that there is no joy apart from the cross. The angels rejoiced at Jesus' birth. But Jesus came to die in our place, making peace with us through the cross because of his great love for us. Therefore, we have hope of eternal life. The shadow of the cross fell over the manger where great joy was expressed, and oddly enough, true joy is only found in our lives when we deny ourselves, take up our crosses daily, and follow him. Let's pray.