

2020 is one for the books! Many of us wish we could have a do-over or erase it from our memories. We've heard words like:

- COVID-19
- Zoom
- A word I never want to hear or use again, unprecedented
- Sorry, we're out of toilet paper!
- The Quarantine 15, not to be confused with the Freshman 15, but the same meaning.
- You're muted again
- Social distancing
- Stay healthy
- Sports are canceled (some of us rejoiced over that one)
- The new normal
- How about leaving your house and going "phone, keys, wallet... mask!"
- Maskne? Acne due to wearing a mask so much
- Mask up!
- Essential workers
- Elbow bumps
- Distance learning, working remotely, contactless delivery
- Quarantine, shelter in place, isolation, social bubbles, stay at home orders
- Tiger King, curbside food
- Flatten the curve, lockdown
- Protests, riots, racism, red and blue states, and counties
- Outdoor dining, murder hornets
- Stimulus checks
- We're in this together
- And the word of the year—pandemic

If you are anything like me, maybe some of these words produce anxiety within you just hearing them. It's been a year full of anxiety and uncertainty. Sickness can be anxiety-inducing; financial hardship can bring anxiety; isolation is anxiety-inducing, even Maskne can produce anxiety. I know for me, I've had to be aware of how anxiety can steal my joy and peace.

At the beginning of the pandemic, on Saturday nights, I would have a hard time sleeping because I was anxious whether the live stream for Sunday would work or what piece of technology wouldn't work due to an overload of the system. All things out of my control.

Anxiety is a normal emotion. It's your brain's way of reacting to stress and alerting you of potential danger ahead, much like an alarm that alerts you to a fire. During this pandemic, anxiety has gone up. According to the US census bureau, anxiety in adults went from 8 percent in 2019 to 30 percent in 2020! If you are struggling with anxiety, you are not alone. There is no shame in it. Even the apostle Paul struggled with anxiety at times. Here me say this again, there is no shame in it! While I know we all feel some kind of anxiety; there is a difference between anxiety and anxiety disorders. For those who struggle with anxiety disorders, what I preach today certainly applies to you, but that doesn't replace the importance of therapy and a mental health expert guidance. God cares about our mental health, just like He cares for our physical and spiritual health.

Paul addresses these issues of joy, anxiety, and peace in Philippians.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:4-9

This is a very familiar passage to many of us. I'm guessing many of you have a magnet with these verses on your fridge! Paul gives five commands to find joy and peace in uncertain times.

We hear a lot about rejoicing, not worrying, not being anxious, praying about everything, and having peace. That sounds like a fantastic life! I want a life like that! Let's remember the context of our letter. The Apostle Paul is in prison, his church is under persecution, and two women are at odds with each other and threatening the church's unity.

This is Paul's most joyful letter. Fourteen times in this short letter, Paul encourages the Philippians to rejoice. Like the word love, joy is mentioned in the Bible over 500 times, and here Paul commands believers to rejoice always! Even though the theme of this letter revolves around joy, Paul reminds his readers to rejoice and find joy in the Lord always.

Command 1: Rejoice

It's been difficult to always be joyful during 2020. It seems like it's been one thing after another, and when you think it can't get any worse, something comes along to prove you wrong! I have felt that my circumstances have stolen my joy on many occasions this year. Many things can steal our joy—*anxiety* as in verse 6 being one of them. Doubt, loss of a loved one, work, sickness, and many other problems can cause believers to lose their joy. And let me say here, I believe there is a big difference between happiness and joy.

Most people would say that happiness and joy are the same thing, but they are not. Happiness is based on our circumstances. Joy is different. Paul is trying to have the Philippians, and believers today, understand that joy means confidence, confidence that God is in control. Joy isn't based on circumstances. Joy is solely based on God! Much like the Fruit of the Spirit of love, joy—*true joy*—comes from being connected to the vine, who is Jesus. Jesus talks about it in John 15:5. *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."*

Sure, Paul, I would like to rejoice always! But see, here is where many people get this passage wrong, it doesn't say, "Rejoice when everything is going well." It says, "rejoice in the Lord..."

Joy comes from our relationship with Jesus. Being connected to Him. So when I let circumstances steal my joy, I'm saying that I don't have confidence that God is in control! Yikes! Remember where Paul was writing this? He was on house arrest, waiting to hear if he would be executed! So if anyone knows about joy in the Lord, it's Paul. What makes Paul rejoice? The good news of Jesus rescuing and redeeming him! Paul understood what David said in Psalm 40, *"He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire...the Lord put a new song in my mouth."* The same goes for us; our joy comes from the good news of Jesus rescuing and redeeming us!

So how long do we rejoice? Always! Paul is giving us a command. Does this mean we do a happy Jesus dance every day when we get up? Does this mean we are never sad or grieving? No! But even in our sadness or our grief, we can say with Paul as he does in 2 Corinthians 6:10, *"sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."*

I think of our dear friend and co-worker Sandy McGreevy, who died suddenly on January 14 of this year. Many of you were in the building attending WBS and watched our staff cry and hold one another, grieving in the hallways. It was a shock to all of us.

In the grief, the sadness, and the pain, we rejoiced because she was with Jesus! Even though we grieved, we rejoiced!

Paul doesn't want us living detached from what's going on in the world, but when difficult times come, we can drink deeply from the well of our salvation that produces joy in the middle of pain. We can agree with the Apostle Peter,

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:8-9

Command 2: Be Known For Gentleness

The second command Paul gives is in verse 5, *"Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."* What would it look like for believers today to be known for gentleness? First, let me say, gentleness isn't weakness. It's this idea of patient endurance. We could even say strength under control. Unfortunately, I don't think our watching world has seen much of our gentleness in 2020.

In the next year, we will tackle the Cultural Engagement Pillar and will talk about our thoughtful and gracious participation in society, as both individuals and as a church community, so that people encounter God through our words and our actions. Our weary world needs to hear and see the wonderful, life-changing news of Jesus, who is for our neighbor and for us. But often, people don't see it because believers aren't gentle or gracious.

Before the November 3 election, I was at breakfast with some folks who don't necessarily relate to Christianity as a result of how Christians have acted in-person and through social media regarding the election. It didn't matter which candidate these people favored; it was how they were treated in conversations that seemed hypocritical. And they flat out asked me if I was one of "those" Christians, and then they said, "because you don't seem like it." Honestly, I almost choked on my pancakes and then offered a quick "Oh Lord, help me now" prayer as I got ready to engage with them. I tried to explain to them who Jesus is and how much he loves each and every one of us. I tried to explain how He has changed my life and that I want to be like him: Displaying his love for people. I want to display his gentleness and grace towards people and stand up for His truth in a kind and gracious way.

Then I reminded them that not all Christians are like the ones they were encountering. Is your gentleness evident to your friends, neighbors, and family members? Do you even desire to cultivate this fruit of the spirit of gentleness in your life? Paul commands us to be known for our gentleness! What an excellent quality to be known for!

Then Paul adds, *"The Lord is near."* Scholars debate over whether Paul means the Lord's return or the Lord's presence. Either way, it's a great reminder about how we live and treat people,

regardless if he is talking about the Lord's return or whether Paul is reminding the Philippians and us that Jesus is close and ready to help them as we live out our Christlikeness.

Paul isn't pulling any punches; if you already "rejoice in the Lord, always," your gentleness shows. Paul mentions a "joy stealer" in this passage, and he gives us another command in verse 6. Paul says, *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."*

Command 3: Pray

Why were the Philippians anxious? They faced threats; they had internal opposition; they were concerned about Paul; they were anxious about God's provision. We can relate! More than ever, people of all ages are struggling with anxiety and worry. We are anxious about paying the bills, about COVID, if we are performing well enough, the amount of homework we have, getting our work done being away from the office, losing a job, someone in the family getting COVID and dying. And yet, if we genuinely believe that God is in control, that He will work things out for His glory, anxiety and worry won't be able to sneak in and steal our joy.

When we are concerned with our worries, we will less likely be able to serve others wholeheartedly. It distracts us from our mission. Deep down, if I'm honest, I've often worried if CPC can survive this pandemic. I hear and read about so many churches who have gone under; I've worried about it! Has that worry distracted me from our mission? Yes! I'm reminded of a slogan a mentor used to say, "We need God's Word to know God's Peace!"

Jesus said in Matthew,

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? Matthew 6:25-27

Jesus tells us the He provides for the birds and flowers; He will surely provide for us. And by the way, He has provided for CPC thanks to you all! He tells us that worry and anxiety are pointless; God knows our needs more than we do. Let me say that one more time: God knows our needs more than we do! Jesus doesn't promise us comfortable lives, but He will give us what we need as we seek after Him. Paul is reminding us of Jesus' own words.

There is also a remedy for worry and anxiety, and that is prayer. He says to relieve your anxiety do this, *"In everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."* Paul is commanding us to pray in this manner. When we enter into times of uncertainty that cause anxiety, pray

with thanksgiving! We can be thankful as we reflect on God's mercies.

Remember, Paul is writing this from prison! Every time worry or anxiety rears its ugly head to steal your joy and peace, take it to God. Are you worried about your job? Take it to the Lord. Are you worried about getting sick? Take it to the Lord! Are you worried about your kids? Take them to the Lord. Nothing is too small or too large for God! Remember, our Father loves to give good gifts to His children. Peter tells us that we should cast all of our cares on God because He cares for us. (1 Peter 5:7) Psalm 55:22, *"Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous to be shaken."*

When worry and anxiety step in, I'm going to focus on what God is doing. He is moving, even in a pandemic, even when churches can't meet in person! I'm thankful for the 24 people who have given their lives to Christ through our Livestream. I'm grateful for the ten people who have been baptized during the pandemic. I'm thankful for the many families who have stepped forward to have their babies dedicated! The platform we use on our website to stream this very service went from 3000 churches using it to 23,000 churches using it during this pandemic! God is on the internet! So when anxiety creeps in, pray and rejoice over what God is doing.

Look at what God promises us when we follow His command to pray. He gives us the promise of peace! Look at verse 7. *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* We talked about how anxiety can easily steal our joy, but it also steals our peace. When we worry and are anxious, we don't have peace. We've talked about giving over our worries to God! But Paul talks about this promise of peace, this unexplainable peace. It's because of Jesus that we can have peace. Jesus talks a lot about peace.

Jesus promised his disciples, as well as us, His peace in John 14:27. *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."* Peace is our inheritance through Jesus.

I sometimes wonder if peace is the most desirable trait possible in this age we live in. Yet, I believe with all my heart that this is the right of every believer. You do not have to be stressed, worried, and full of anxiety. We just finished celebrating Advent. Advent proclaims peace. Advent is nothing more than peace coming to us—peace coming into the pain, loss, fear, and hate. God came into the midst of this hurting world. Why? To bring peace that comes from realizing that we are not alone. Through Jesus, we can have peace believing God is in control, even when the future seems uncertain, because God is true to His word. Do you know what that unexplainable peace does? It allows us to rejoice, and it guards our hearts and mind.

We can also fight our anxiety with faith in God's promises remembering that the "Lord is near" (verse 5). As Jesus ascended into heaven, what did he tell the disciples? "I'm with you always" (Matt 28:20). We can fight anxiety, remembering the promise that the Lord is near us and will return for us!

Command 4: Think on Praiseworthy Things

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. v. 8

What a list! Let me reiterate, Paul is not asking us to retreat from the world or live in la-la land. He is talking about renewing our minds. According to the National Science Foundation, a typical person has about 12,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day. Of those, 80 percent are negative, and 95 percent are repetitive thoughts. That is a lot of negativity running through our minds. When we are anxious or worried, we tend to start thinking about all the things that might go wrong or have already gone wrong. Paul could have gone there too, but he didn't. What Paul does here is brilliant.

O'Brien Commentary states,

Paul took terms that were current in moral philosophy and pressed them into service for Christianity. This was moral language the surrounding pagan culture of Rome could understand.

Paul is trying to engage the culture in terms they could understand but at the same time reflecting the likeness of Jesus. As we continue to surrender to Christ, He continues transforming us. He renews our mind!

He tells us to think about these things:

- whatever is true—not false
- whatever is noble—not twisted
- whatever is right—not wrong
- whatever is pure—not impure
- whatever is lovely—not vile
- whatever is admirable—not shameful
- whatever is excellent—not flawed
- whatever is praiseworthy—not objectionable

That sounds great and all, but how do I fix my mind on those things? I like to think of it as using a filter. Have you made coffee? Have you ever forgotten to put the coffee filter in? What happens if you don't put the coffee filter in? All the grounds go in

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

the coffee, and it tastes nasty. As followers of Jesus, we have a filter, too; He's called the Holy Spirit. He can help us filter what we focus our attention on and what we think about. If it doesn't pass the filter test, if it's not true, noble, right, pure, loving, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy, then don't waste your time thinking about it!

Paul's last command is to follow Godly examples.

Command 5: Follow Godly examples.

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (v. 9). Paul was offering up himself as an example. Paul had the mind of Christ. He not only contemplated the "whatevers," he lived them out. He called the Philippians to follow his example, and he calls us to follow his example! Look at Paul's life; learn from him. Learn from an older believer who has lived some life, learn from a trustworthy Christian leader. I'm so thankful for the people I've had in my life who have been Godly examples. Learn from the people who have set their minds on Christ! Do this in community with one another!

Paul says to practice these things! Practice! How do we follow these commands? By practice. I remember being in kindergarten and talking my parents into getting me a piano! I wanted to play the piano because my grandmother played it and I loved listening to her. The deal was they would get the piano, but I had to practice. Well, as an excited six-year-old, I said, "Of course, I will practice!" About the time I entered Jr. High, I was tired of practicing. I loved playing, but the pieces were getting harder and harder. I remember my mom would sit me down on the piano bench, and I couldn't leave it until the oven timer went off!

Sometimes when our lives are difficult and full of uncertainty, these commands to rejoice, be gentle, pray, think on praiseworthy things, and follow Godly examples can be like sitting there at the piano bench waiting for the timer to go off and be done. It can be hard, especially in times of uncertainty.

In this time and space of 2020, I feel like I'm waiting for the oven timer to go off so I can be done with it. But when I do that, when I go there, I miss out on the last promise God gives us—"The peace of God." It's not just peace; it's himself. It's His peace. As we enter 2021, remember that God's peace and His presence cannot be separated. It's through Jesus we can find joy and peace in uncertainty.

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