

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Wednesday, November 21, 2007**

Thanksgiving Eve 2007

ALWAYS

Philippians 4:4-13

I want to draw your attention this evening to three Bible verses (or, in one case, a brief passage of three verses) that I have a lot of trouble with. It wouldn't surprise me if some of you do, too. The trouble I have is not that I don't understand what these verses are saying. Nor is it that I take issue with what they say. It is just that I find them so hard to live out on a consistent basis.

One of these verses is James 1:2: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." The problem I have is that I don't usually connect trials and joy in my thinking.

Second is this passage of three verses from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, where Paul says: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." The problem I have is with the words "always" and "in all circumstances." It is not a hard thing to be joyful sometimes, or to give thanks in some circumstances, especially when things are going well in my life. But to do it *always* and *in all circumstances* is a different story. Maybe that is true in your life, too.

Third is what Paul says here in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always." And to make sure we really get the point, he says: "I will say it again: Rejoice!" Once again there is that word *always*. It is such a definite word. So absolute and all-inclusive. It covers every possible situation and circumstance and experience in life. It is a high standard. In fact, the bar cannot be set any higher.

Then there is the word *rejoice*. It is not a suggestion. It is not a request. It is presented as a command. It is an imperative for the followers of Christ. It is how we are to live. It is something we are commanded to do.

But rejoicing doesn't always come easily to us. Sometimes it can be difficult to the point of seeming impossible to us. It can be especially hard in those seasons of life when things are not going the way we want them to go.

- When the duties and demands of life just seem overwhelming
- When you are dealing with the death of a loved one – whether a spouse, parent, child or friend
- When you are facing financial difficulties or the loss of your job
- When you live daily with pain that just won't go away
- When you are dealing with declining mobility or the loss of your sight or hearing

- When cancer invades your body or you are diagnosed with heart disease
- When you find yourself in the midst of relational conflict
- When other people hurt you or let you down
- When you or someone you love is called to go to war in Iraq or Afghanistan, where danger is a constant companion
- When the threat of terrorism hangs over your head like a dark cloud

Rejoicing doesn't come easily in times or situations like these. Some of you know that I had an MRI a week ago today which revealed a small tumor on a nerve in my brain, which has caused some hearing loss in my left ear. The tumor is small, slow-growing, and benign – all things for which to be grateful. But still, something that does not belong there is present. And left unchecked, it may have some serious consequences for my health and well-being. So I want you to know it is true in my experience. Rejoicing doesn't always come easily. It is easier said than done.

But I want you to notice what Paul does not say: “Rejoice in the Lord always – except when something bad or unpleasant happens to you.” Nor does he say: “Give thanks to the Lord in all circumstances – except when life turns sour or the way becomes hard.”

And James does not say: “Consider it pure joy, my friends – as long as God gives you smooth sailing on the sea of life.”

No. The Bible says *always*. *In all circumstances*. *No matter what happens* (1 Thessalonians 5:18, [The Message](#)). Even if you have a brain tumor. Or whatever it may be for you. We are to rejoice in the Lord always. We are to rejoice in the goodness and sufficiency of God, who is greater than our circumstances, greater than any challenge or trial or hardship that may come our way in life. I'll be honest with you: I'm still a work in progress with a long way to go in this. I don't know about all of you, but I have not yet reached the place in my life where I rejoice in the Lord always or give thanks in all circumstances, especially when troubles or hardship or disappointment or pain hit hard. I'm not there yet. Some days I do better than other days. Maybe that is true for you, too. But I want to get there. I want to get to the place where I rejoice in the Lord always and give thanks to Him no matter what my circumstances, because it is unavoidably and unmistakably the case that this is what God desires from me. This is God's will for me. For all of us.

Here is a little Thanksgiving history for you: In November 1620, 102 English Pilgrims arrived at Massachusetts after an arduous 66-day voyage across the Atlantic. That first winter in New England, half of their number died. They made seven times more graves for the dead than huts for the living. And yet, they still set aside a special day of Thanksgiving in November 1621 to acknowledge and celebrate the goodness and benevolence of God.

Rejoice in the Lord *always*. Give thanks to the Lord *in all circumstances*. For this is God's will for you, for me, for all who seek to live under His Lordship. So the question becomes: How do we do it? How do we rejoice in the Lord *always* and give thanks to

Him no matter what happens? I think Paul gives us several practical pointers here in Philippians 4.

1. REMEMBER THAT THE LORD IS NEAR

Notice what Paul says in verse 5: “Let your gentleness (or forbearance) be evident to all. The Lord is near.” If you want to rejoice in the Lord always, always keep in mind – never forget – that the Lord is near, and live accordingly, with a gentle, forbearing spirit.

Paul’s statement that the Lord is near is most likely a reference to the promise of Christ’s return, His coming again not in weakness but in power, not in humility and suffering but in sovereignty and majesty and glory. Paul’s point is that it could happen at any time. Christ’s return to wrap things up and to take all His people to be with Him forever could take place at any moment – “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52). For those of us who know Christ and belong to Him by faith, it will be a happy day. It will be a joyous day. A day of celebration unlike any other. So we are to rejoice even now, in anticipation of that day and what it will bring.

But Paul’s words also serve as a reminder to us and a recognition of the truth that the Lord is near to us in our weaknesses and hardships and trials. David reminds us in Psalm 145:18 that “the Lord is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth.” No matter what trouble you may be facing, no matter what burden you may be carrying, God is never more than a prayer away. He is always standing by. His grace is always available. And it is always sufficient. Always.

Not only this, but there is no place you can go and no trouble you can experience that somehow lie outside the bounds of God’s sovereignty, because there is not a single inch in the whole universe where God is not sovereign. Listen to David again this time from Psalm 139:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
 Where can I flee from Your presence?
 If I go up to the heavens You are there;
 If I make my bed in the depths (Sheol), You are there.
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
 If I settle on the far side of the sea,
 Even there Your hand will guide me,
 Your right hand will hold me fast.
 If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
 And the light become night around me,”
 Even the darkness will not be dark to You;
 The night will shine like the day,
 For darkness is as light to You.
 (Psalm 139:7-12)

Wherever you and I go, God is there. His strong hand undergirds us and keeps us in His care. He will not let us out of His sight. He says to us in Isaiah 41:10:

Do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

And in Isaiah 43:2-3:

When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you.
And when you pass through the rivers,
They will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
You will not be burned;
The flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the Lord, your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Knowing that the Lord is near can enable us to bear with one another (Colossians 3:13) and to bear with our circumstances with a spirit of joy and an attitude of gratitude. Always.

2. REPLACE WORRY WITH PRAYER

Second, notice what Paul says in verse 6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

Be anxious about nothing. Pray about everything. Replace worry with prayer. The word that is translated “anxious” in this verse is the word *merimnao*, which means “to be unduly concerned about anything.” And the instruction of God’s Word is: Don’t. Don’t cross the line from appropriate, loving concern about someone or something to an undue, obsessive concern which betrays a lack of trust in God.

Two or three years ago the *AARP Bulletin* asked its readers to share their strategies for coping with stress. One man shared this plan: At the beginning of every year, he said, “I give my wife \$1, and she worries about everything for both of us.” But that’s not all. The man went on to say: “If someone else wants to be worry free, they can also send her a dollar.”

If you think something like this might work for you, feel free to send your contribution – over and above your regular giving – to the church, and we’ll take care of it for you! (I’m kidding, of course.) We won’t worry for you. What we will do is turn those worries into prayers, which is a much better strategy. A biblical strategy. What Paul counsels is

this: Give your worries and anxieties, your problems and fears to God. Replace worry with prayer in your life.

Corrie ten Boom used to say that when she was tempted to worry about a particular problem or situation, she would stand in front of a mirror and say: “This problem is too big for Jesus to handle.” Inevitably, as she did that, she would burst out laughing at the absurdity of what she had just said.

Corrie ten Boom also said: “There is no panic in heaven.” You and I may be tempted to panic from time to time. There may be panic in our hearts. But there is no panic in heaven. God never presses the panic button. He has no need to. For there is no problem too big and no situation too hard for Him.

When you are tempted to panic, when you feel overwhelmed with worry or anxiety, take it to God in prayer. Replace worry with prayer. When you do, Paul says in verse 7, God will give you the gift of His peace to protect your mind from doubt and your heart from worry or fear. And you will be able to rejoice in the Lord. Always.

3. THANKFUL THINKING

Third, practice the art of thankful thinking. Notice verse 8: “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.”

It is not hard to fall into a pattern of negative thinking. Just watch the news – or better yet, don’t watch the news! The only kind of news that seems to make the news is bad news. Focus instead on what is good in life, and reflect on it. Think about the part of the glass that is full of good things rather than the part that seems empty. Take time each day, as the song says, to “count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings, see what God has done.” Be intentional about looking for those things that are “true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse” (4:8, The Message) – those things that are pleasing and honorable in God’s sight. And respond with a heart of gratitude to God.

Here in America we live in the richest nation on earth, but a recent study by the World Health Organization and Harvard Medical School indicates that the U.S. may be the saddest nation in the world. Among the 14 nations studied, America has the highest rate of depression, even though other nations suffer from extreme poverty or high unemployment or war in their homeland.

Why is that so? Could it be that in our prosperity and comfort we have come to expect more from life than we should? Could it be that we look around at all we have and still we want more? Could it be that many Americans are looking for joy in the wrong places and seeking fulfillment in the wrong things? Could it be that, in the media obsession

with everything that is wrong in America or the world, we have lost sight of those things that inspire us to excellence and prompt us to respond in praise to God?

What we need is to cultivate an attitude of gratitude and the habit of thankful thinking.

4. LEARN TO BE CONTENT

Look at what Paul says in verses 11 and 12: “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

Have you learned the secret of contentment? A philosopher named Epictetus (ca. AD 100) said that “contentment comes not so much from great wealth as from few wants.” Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish theologian, said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive, but then it is also more blessed to be able to do without than have to have.” So there is no direct correlation between wealth and contentment.

Billy Graham tells a story in his autobiography that illustrates this. He and his wife Ruth were visiting a Caribbean island. One of the richest men in the world invited them to lunch at his lavish home. The man was 75 years old, and throughout the meal he seemed on the verge of tears. He said to the Grahams: “I am the most miserable man in the world. Out there is my yacht. I can go anywhere I want to. I have my private plane, my helicopters. I have everything I want to make my life happy, yet I am as miserable as hell.” The Grahams talked with him and prayed with him, seeking to point him to Christ, who alone can satisfy the God-shaped void in our lives.

After lunch the Grahams returned to the small cottage where they were staying. That afternoon a local pastor came to call on them. He was from England, and he too was 75. He was a widower who spent most of his time taking care of his two invalid sisters. With joy in his heart he said to Billy and Ruth: “I don’t have (five dollars) to my name, but I am the happiest man on this island.”

Which of those two do you think was the richer man?

Paul, remarkably, was in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter to the Philippians with its message of joy in the Lord. Even in prison, with his freedom taken away and his future uncertain, Paul could say: “I have learned to be content.” Where did his spirit of contentment come from? Did it come from the things he had accumulated? No. Did it come from his circumstances? Of course not. His contentment – and his joy – came from the Lord, who is the source of true contentment and lasting joy in life.

My friends, rejoice in the Lord – rejoice in His goodness and grace, His power and sufficiency – always. Not only when the sun is shining brightly on you and when all is well in your world, but even on the road marked with suffering and with pain in the offing.

Rejoice in the Lord always! It is so important I will say it again: Rejoice!

How?

By remembering that the Lord is near.

By turning your worries into prayers.

By practicing thankful thinking.

By learning to be content whatever your circumstances.

Do these things and you will not only have a happy Thanksgiving, you will live a life marked by gratitude to God and joy in the Lord. No matter what.

Lord, let it be so in us (and in me), to the glory of Your name. Amen.