

Philippians 4:4-7

Theme: Rejoice, Believer

“What do you do with the mad that you feel When you feel so mad you could bite? When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...And nothing you do seems very right?” Fred Rogers, one of the greatest people of the 20th century, sang this song to a nation of people that largely didn’t know how to process emotions well. His gentle questions weren’t childish, but deeply human. He understood how hard it can be to name what we feel, to know what to do with those feelings, and how essential it is to avoid bottling them up so they aren’t unleashed destructively. He was a Christian, a pastor in addition to show frontrunner, and his faith fueled a compassion that taught people, young and old alike, how to pause, breathe, and respond with kindness.

Life gives us plenty of reasons to feel disappointed, frustrated, and filled with heart pounding anger. What do we do with that? We’ve many unhealthy options: giving full vent to it, gossiping, ignoring, numbing. These only exacerbate things. We’ve some healthier options: movement, journaling, meditating, and honest and measured conversations. In addition, talk to God. Pray to your Father in heaven that he’d overwhelm you anew with his love and empower you to rejoice in his saving love no matter what. The Spirit who connects you to Christ sees to that.

Paul says, “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (**Phil. 4:4**) This is one of those overarching applicable to the entirety of the Christian life passages. Paul isn’t giving a shallow command to plaster on a phony smile through pain. Paul is drawing our attention to the reality that’s bigger and better than our current circumstances. Rejoicing is a steady gladness rooted in well-being which is yours because the Savior, Jesus, has already secured our eternal future. Some days you do trudge forward on little more than little determination, dragging one foot in front of the other with hope, not in this world but the next, because you know God wins. You know he’s freed you. You know life in this world can’t grind you down, not completely. So don’t let it! That knowledge, unchanging and not able to be taken away from you, is cause for rejoicing even when you don’t feel particularly happy. It goes well with you all the time because you’re saved by Jesus all the time. It goes well with you in the grandest sense. Rejoice, believer.

What’s rejoicing look like? It looks like the fruits of the Spirit, one of which is self-control. Mr. Rogers’ song continues, “It’s great to be able to stop When you’ve planned a thing that’s wrong, And be able to do something else instead.” That pause, that Spirit given ability to stop and reconsider in the heat of the moment, is a big component of emotional regulation. Scripture calls us again and again to this. Instead of walking the way of anger, we get to walk with Christ along this path, “*Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*” (**Phil. 4:5**) In the spirit of rejoicing always, be gentle. Don’t force people to dig beneath a thorny exterior to find a kind heart. Let kindness be obvious to all people, literally everyone.

Why can this be so hard? Because beneath whatever façade we put on, there’s a vulnerable, tender self longing to be loved, truly seen, and accepted. When these fundamental needs are met, we feel secure. When we feel secure, gentleness flows more freely. But when we fear we won’t be accepted, or when past sincerity was met with attack and we remember that pain, our vulnerable inner self beneath the mask is wounded. Then we grow guarded. Our kindness becomes selective, given only when we feel safe. When someone’s ideas seem strange or threatening, a lack of understanding easily turns into fear, and fear often masquerades as anger. Don’t give way to fear. Be courageous in Jesus to be kind to all.

“Gentleness” means a kind, tolerant, yielding spirit which doesn’t insist on every right of custom. Do we actually treat all people with genuine forbearance? Or do we quietly expect others to adopt our

preferences so we can remain comfortable? We may not plan it that way, but it's so often what happens! Be kind, be yielding, follower of Christ. This isn't optional, it's gospel imperative. Let your gentleness be evident to all. If nothing else, may every person of any belief system walk away from any interaction with you knowing they were loved.

Why? The Lord is near. His return happens soon and your gentleness being evident to all is a way of testifying to your faith, it's a living invitation to see what Christ's love is all about. As Christians eagerly awaiting that day, we take his command seriously. If we don't, we should ask whether we value God's gift of salvation enough to live like those who are saved. Am I so grateful to be connected to Christ that I consider it joy to keep in step with him by the Spirit, producing kindness, gentleness, and true tolerance (which is patiently enduring stuff, not endorsing it)? Jesus says he looks for such fruit when he returns and trees which don't produce it are cut down. A life of evident love is who you are in Christ. You are a forgiven sinner on a one-way, fully paid for path to heaven, and you rejoice to live like it.

As your gentleness is being made known to your neighbor, let your prayers be made known to God. Tell God everything on your heart. *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* **(Phil. 4:6)** Pray for peace. Pray for compassion to rise where harshness and cruelty have taken root. Pray for healing for victims of violence and for the mechanisms which propagate it to be broken. Pray for your loved ones, that God would bless them beyond the limits of your imagination and then pray for God to do the same for the person who hates you or whom you've labeled an enemy. Let God know you're thankful for salvation and his daily care. Ask him to shape you into someone who reflects his love and care to all, even those who mistreat you. Whatever it is, pour it out to God. He's your Father. He loves to hear from his children. Have a sit down with Jesus, he's your brother. He's been through it too and gives great advice.

Paul closes Philippians with a flurry of encouragements, directions, and assurances. Here's a powerful and familiar one, *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* **(Phil. 4:7)** Peace is pictured as a sentry on watch duty standing steadfast, alert, and protective. Christ's peace guards anxious hearts and fearful minds. It surpasses understanding because it flows from Christ's cross which itself surpasses understanding. God gave his own Son to wash away sin and make you his! That is staggering but the glory of the resurrection is so much higher! The living Lamb who conquered sin and death, who overcame the whole world, is your life and the reason you rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord, believer. Jesus is near. His peace guards you, so let your gentleness show. Let your prayers rise before him. And let the love of Christ be your gladness always. Amen.