

Peace with, for, and of God

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 8, 2020.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:4-7).¹

Peace at times seems in short supply. If we learned anything this last week, it is that we are a country divided politically. But does such division inevitably sacrifice peace? And what about the church? How are we to live out the peace we have with God amidst such divisiveness?

The Apostle Paul counsels us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). What does “peaceably” look like when circumstances don’t seem conducive to peace? And what about our own spiritual and emotional health? How are we to respond to the angst of our age? What can we do, other than worry, when our circumstances seem worrisome?

Let’s start by understanding what peace is. To do this, I want us to consider three different perspectives of biblical peace: peace with God, peace for God, and peace of God.

The Greek word translated “peace” has a variety of connotations but from its origin typically refers to goodwill between parties, such as two countries, and the blessings that flow from that goodwill. It is similar to the Hebrew word translated “peace” (*shalom*), which incorporates a more holistic meaning, involving both material and spiritual blessings.² For example, the psalmist sings of the Lord’s salvation of Israel,

Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky.
Yes, the LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way (Ps. 85:10-13).

It is a song that combines both material (“land”) and spiritual (“righteousness”) blessings. The psalmist longs for this peace.

In the New Testament the concept of *shalom* is translated from the geographical, national, and ethnic context of Israel to the worldwide, international, multiethnic context of spiritual Israel, or the church. The concept of peace remains holistic, but it also carries an already-but-not-yet aspect to it. Physically, there will one day be peace on earth, when our Lord returns, after judgment, and when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven. In the new heaven and earth righteousness and peace will indeed “kiss each other.”

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² “Peace with God,” Ligonier Ministries, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/peace-god-romans/>.

There is also a peace that we may enjoy already, even today. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul explains that all who “have been justified by faith...have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). To be “justified” means to be in legal right standing. We who are sinners by nature, thought, word, and deed are reconciled to a holy God. By God’s grace, we are justified through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The result of this act of God’s grace is peace with our Creator, who we are privileged to call our Father.

So extraordinary is this relational peace that it demands a response. Such a glorious grace demands a number of responses actually, but I want to focus on just one. Because of our peace with God, we are to rejoice. In fact, we are commanded to: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice.”

Celebrate Peace

Is this realistic? Is it feasible? Can the Christian always rejoice? Paul uses this verb not as a suggestion but as a command: Rejoice! Be glad!

To rejoice in the Lord is to continually celebrate the peace we have with God, living out our lives in light of his sovereign grace. Consider what your state could be apart from God’s grace. You could be alienated from the One who loves you most. You could experience the torment of hell. Consider the sobering truth that there is nothing worthy of salvation in and of us. And now, consider the fact that God saves us by his grace alone through faith in Christ alone. This (alone) should lead us to always rejoice!

What then keeps us from always rejoicing in the Lord? One thing is unconfessed sin. The Apostle John teaches us to “confess our sins” not based on our character but God’s, who is “faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This does not mean that we must confess every sinful detail, nor does it mean that God withholds forgiveness if we fail to confess in detail. The point is the process: confess your sin to the Lord. We are to keep nothing from our Lord, including our sins. So, a joyless Christian may be miserable because of unconfessed sin.

Similarly, habitual sin can rob us of joy, always sinning rather than always rejoicing. We are not only to be quick to confess our sins, but we are also to repent of them. Sometimes we consider the two terms synonymous, confess and repent, but repentance means that we not only confess our sins, but we turn from them. To commit the same sin consistently and repeatedly makes it no less forgivable but it will make you joyless. It’s difficult to rejoice in the Lord when your heart and mind are captivated by a particular sin rather than God’s grace.

Another thing that keeps us from always rejoicing is the circumstances of life. How easily joy in the Lord can be replaced with frustration, anger, and worry, among other emotions. In fact, it is remarkable how long we can go without rejoicing in the Lord, even held emotionally captive to past and present circumstances or worry about the future.

Christian joy is *not* circumstantial. Let us remember that Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians from prison, where he referred to himself as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:10). This was not a superficial gladness, ignoring the circumstances of his life. Christian joy is not circumstantial, but it does not ignore circumstances. Rather, Paul views the circumstances of life through the lens of God’s sovereign grace. Which explains how, when he and Silas were beaten and imprisoned for preaching the gospel, they could joyfully sing hymns in their jail cell (Acts 16:25).

What then is keeping you from always rejoicing? Is it because you do not yet have peace with God? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, and enjoy peace with God that you may always rejoice in him. Is it because you harbor sin, unwilling to confess it to your heavenly Father? Is the gospel of grace not good enough? Have you not been justified through faith? Trust the Lord! Confess your sin that you may rejoice in the Lord. Is it because of habitual sin in your life? Repent! Turn from your sin and to the Lord in whom your heart desires to rejoice. Or, have you allowed the circumstances of this present darkness to rob you of rejoicing in the light of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ? Look from your circumstances to the One who uses circumstances for your Christ-exalting good and God’s glory.

Maintain Peace

For those who have peace with God, always rejoicing in the Lord, we are therefore called, in fact commanded, to maintain peace: “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” Christian “reasonableness” like Christian joy, is found exclusively in Christ and flows from his indwelling presence. And just as Christian joy is not circumstantial nor is our “reasonableness.”

The Greek word translated “reasonableness” may also be translated “gentleness” or “graciousness,” which I prefer. Drawn from its literary use, the word in essence means “a balanced, intelligent, decent outlook in contrast to licentiousness,” but more specific to this passage it likely means “a humble, patient, steadfastness, which is able to submit to injustice, disgrace and maltreatment without hatred or malice, trusting God in spite of it all.”³ Trusting in God’s grace helps us to be gracious. Christian graciousness submits one’s rights for the sake of others, in humility counting others more significant than self (Phil. 2:3).

Such graciousness is also comprehensive. We are to let it be known not merely to those we love, or those with whom we agree, or those we want to agree with us: We are to let it be known to *everyone*. Why “everyone”? Consider what graciousness in the midst of difficult circumstances reveals: Christlikeness. Just as the Son of God “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (Phil. 2:8), so we who are in Christ are to let our Christlike graciousness be known.

In fact, consider the testimony that such Christ-exalting graciousness reveals to your family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and church family. Rather than self-exalting obstinance they

³ R. Leivestad quoted in Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 487.

see submission. Rather than self-preserving arrogance they see humility. Rather than fleshly unreasonableness, they see Christian reasonableness. In other words, the testimony of Christian graciousness reveals our Lord in whom we always rejoice.

Enjoy Peace

There is, however, a third command in our passage closely connected to the two others. Just as we are commanded to rejoice always and to let our graciousness be known, so we are to “not be anxious about anything.” Worry is neither compatible with joy nor graciousness when we are at peace with God.

In the Greek, the command is actually quite strong: “*Stop* worrying about anything.” It’s an imperative confronting one of our most habitual sins. For the Christian worry is both unreasonable and joyless, and it certainly isn’t Christlike. In fact, when tempted to worry, our Lord teaches us not to look to our circumstances but to look to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Worry over the things of this life is characteristic of pagans not children of God (Matt. 6:25-32).

The fact is we are all tempted to worry from time to time, and some of us commit the sin daily. What is the remedy? Prayer: We are to pray about “everything.” Is this Pauline hyperbole? Are we really supposed to pray about everything? Don’t divorce this word from the context. Contextually, “everything” means: If it is a matter that tempts you to worry, that makes you anxious, then it must be a matter of prayer. Pray about these things.

So important is prayer that Paul uses three terms to describe it: “prayer,” “supplications,” and “requests.” Based on the use of all three words elsewhere in the New Testament, we may conclude that we are to pray to our heavenly Father for others and ourselves consistently and expectantly. Prayer reveals our dependence upon God, or as R.C. Sproul put it, “True prayer presupposes an attitude of humble submission and adoration to the almighty God.”⁴ Worrying rather than praying says a lot about what you truly think about God. Not praying reveals not only a lack of trust in God but also an arrogant, rebellious heart. It also leaves you wallowing in worry.

Undergirding our prayers is a key characteristic of the Christian life: “thanksgiving.” Like rejoicing and graciousness, thanksgiving is not circumstantial. In fact, Paul literally told the Thessalonians, “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18). “All circumstances” is comprehensive, as is God’s will.

The result of this exhortation, regardless of whether our prayers are answered, is unimaginable peace. And not only is it unimaginable, it is also powerful, standing like an army around our hearts and minds. For he who is the Lord of peace, gives peace, guards peace, because he is peace himself.

For this reason, Paul reminds us that “The Lord is at hand.” His presence in all who believe is real, the certainty of his return is sure, and the reign of his kingdom is forever. It is only in Christ

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *Does Prayer Change Things?* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019).

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that we have peace *with God*, so let us always rejoice in him. It is only in Christ that we maintain peace *for God*, making our graciousness known to everyone for Christ's sake. It is only in Christ that we enjoy the peace of God, bringing our prayers to him through our Prince of Peace.

And so, my prayer for us is: May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus, keeping us from worry, encouraging peace with everyone, and enabling us to always rejoice in our Lord. Amen.