

Scripture:

**Philippians 4:4-9**

“Think about such things ---- and then put them into practice.”

Today in Paul’s letter to the Philippians ----- we have before us about as much as can possibly be packed ---- into 6 verses of scripture.

In 6 short verses Paul speaks of rejoicing in the Lord -----the need for gentleness ----- as well as the need not to get anxious and to pray.

He talks about focusing on things that are ----- true ---- noble ----- right ----- pure ---- lovely ----- admirable ----- excellent --- and praiseworthy ---- and then counsels to put these things into practice --- so that Gods’ peace might be with us.

Talk about jammed packed.

Rejoice ----- be gentle ----- don’t be anxious --- pray ----- think about that which is true ----- noble ----- right --- pure ---- lovely admirable --- excellent --- and praiseworthy ---- and then ---- oh yeah by the way ----- don’t just think about these things but put them into practice as well ----- all in 6 short verses.

In the NIV version of the Bible ----- the headline for these 6 verses is -----  
---- “Final Exhortations” ----- “Final Exhortations”.

In other words these are Paul’s final words to his friends and fellow Christians at Philippi before he starts to draw his letter to a close.

And the church at Philippi faced a number of challenges ----- they were the first European church --- they were a border church on the line between Europe and Asia at that time ----- and they were far away from the other older and more established churches.

And they were a church made up of mostly gentiles ----- those who had no familiarity with the Old Testament --- one of the reasons Paul never quotes anything from the Old Testament in his letter to them.

As chapter 1 verses 27-28 indicates this early church community faced challenges as they worked at remaining faithful and true to Jesus Christ.

And of course Paul himself was in no easy position either --- his circumstances when writing this letter are far from ideal.

Paul wrote to the Philippians from jail ---- as he was imprisoned for his faith.

And this of course just stands to drive home the power and level of conviction that Paul has in saying ----- “Rejoice in the Lord always --- and again I say rejoice.”

Neither he nor the Philippians have much to rejoice in if you look at their current circumstances --- their life situation.

Persecution --- challenges to denounce their faith ----- great opposition --- this is the context for Paul and those he writes to in this fledging church.

And this rejoicing regardless of the context is one of the points that Paul addresses in this letter as a whole and not just the small section we heard read today.

In fact joy and rejoicing ---- is the thread that ties the letter together.

And there is a great difference between happiness ---- short term --- external circumstance driven elation----- and joy --- long term --- divinely inspired elation.

Happiness is something we get from things of this world --- special gifts --- exciting events ----- external circumstances.

Joy on the other hand is far deeper and stronger --- joy is the quiet ---- confident assurance of God’s love at work in our lives and in the whole of creation.

Joy is the assurance that no matter what God is here for us.

Happiness depends on happenings ----- joy depends on Christ.

So when Paul says rejoice ---- be joyful --- he is talking about divine assurance in Christ that all will ultimately ----- and finally --- and eternally -- - be well.

Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice ----- even in the difficult times ---- even when you are in prison --- in the low --- feeling constricted and tightly bound times in life --- this is the central point and focus for the letter of Philippians as a whole ---- but there's more as well.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all.” ----- verse 5 from our reading today.

“Let your gentleness be evident to all.”

The world could do with a whole lot more gentleness.

And gentleness means a whole lot more than just nice ---- kind --- soft ----- compassionate.

Christian gentleness is far more than just ----- niceness ---- kindness ---- softness and compassion.

Christian gentleness is also about grace and mercy.

Gentleness is knowing when to assert --- rules and regulations --- and statutes and laws --- and penalties and consequence ---- and ----- it's also about knowing when to throw these things out the window and demonstrate grace and mercy instead.

Living in Christ we understand that life is very very short ----- and that because of this there are times when enforcing stern justice is not the best and most faithful thing to do ---- even when if it makes perfect sense.

When we live in Christ we see the need to deal with people in grace and mercy --- in gentleness --- in non cheques and balances way --- beyond “fairness” ---- and instead in grace and in mercy.

The very same grace and mercy that God shows to us -- and gives to us in Christ.

Gentleness includes sometimes forgetting what people may very rightly and justly deserve --- and instead exercising grace and mercy.

What we deserve is human talk ----- human standards.

In contrast ----- gentleness --- grace ----- mercy --- is divine talk ----- what we are given in Christ --- and what we must ----- more often than we sometimes like even ----- also give to others.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” --- verse 6 from our reading.

“Do not be anxious....”

This is a tough one for many ----- anxiety --- fear --- anxiousness ----- stress can be tough to manage and deal with.

We all have them ---- in some degree or another.

For some they practically even rules over us ---- gripping us in unhealthy ways.

But we can't let this happen ----- we can't allow anxiety to rule over us.

Easier said than done yes --- but with faith --- very possible ---- and necessary as well.

A child takes any and everything to their parent ---- and releases themselves from much of the anxiety of it the minute they share it with their parent.

So we are to be with God.

We are to take to Him all that causes us concern --- and we are to leave it there.

That's a huge part of what ----- “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” ---- means.

Some say that all anxiety at its root is a fundamental lack of faith ---- a fundamental lack of trust in God.

And there's some truth to this.

Anxiety can be seen as taking things upon ourselves instead of giving them up to God --- and trusting in God to do with them as He sees fit.

Now --- if you're someone particularly liable to anxiety --- this isn't meant to beat you down ----- Paul says it as encouragement --- and as a method of managing stress and anxiety and releasing us from its grips.

Paul doesn't want to beat down his fledging church ---- his fellow disciples in Christ ---- he wants to encourage them ----- and specifically in Philippians he wants to encourage them to see that in Christ --- knowing that things will work out as God so desires them ----- we ought to be filled with joy --- not anxiety --- not even happiness --- but sheer joy.

When anxiety comes ---- when stress comes --- don't beat yourself up ---- don't think you lack faith --- don't try to mangle it yourself ----- pray ---- seek faith --- cultivate ---- nurture the gift of faith ---- and pray --- and share it with God --- and give it over to God.

Praying isn't just about seeking solutions ----- prayer is also about --- giving over to God and releasing the need to find a solution.

Present your requests to God --- Paul says ----- and present them with thanksgiving.

And we present them with thanksgiving not because God is so vain that He needs to hear thanksgiving all the time.

We present them with thanksgiving not just because we have so much to be thankful for --- although this is true too.

But we present them with thanksgiving because giving thanks changes us.

It changes how we see the world --- how we see ourselves ----- how we see others.

It changes how we see our challenges ---- our obstacles --- those things that are causing us the stress and the anxiety in the first place.

Thanksgiving changes our reality.

Giving thanks is one of the greatest stress and anxiety releasing things we can do ----- especially giving thanks to God in prayer ----- because it re-frames our priorities and our reality.

So --- according to Paul --- and he's on to something ----- we must give thanks --- we must rejoice in the Lord always.

Finally --- brothers and sisters --- whatever is true." ----- verse 8.

“Whatever is true...”

What does it mean to say something is true?

To say something is true is far more than just saying it happened ----- it took place or transpired.

Because untrue things can happen too.

There are many things in life that are deceptive and illusory ---- promising what they cannot ever deliver --- and therefore untrue ---- and yet are true in the sense that they happen ---- they took place.

True things ----- and they are few and far between ---- are things which never let us down.

True things are those things that never let us down.

God's love --- forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus our Lord --- salvation in Jesus the Christ ----- these things are true ---- these things never let us down ----- these are the things that Paul encourages us to think about --- and then put into practice.

A little further along in verse 8 ----- “Noble”.

Whatever is noble.

There are things in the world that are flippant and cheap and attractive to the weak minded pleasure seekers --- forget about thinking or acting upon such things or desires.

The Christian is to set their minds --- hearts and spirit ---- on things that are serious and dignified ----- things that are holy and not just worldly.

Holy and not just worldly.

Things of substance ----- things of divine substance and not just passing short term pleasures.

Noble things last --- they satisfy for a very long time ---- they stay with us.

And then Paul says think about ----- whatever is right.

What is right for a Christian.

What is right often has a sense of duty and responsibility associated with it.

Duty and responsibility to our fellow human beings.

The world often sets its mind on pleasure ---- comfort and ease.

In contrast the Christian is to set their minds on duty ---- duty to fellow human beings ----- and duty to God.

Obedience --- accountability and responsibility ---- duty to care for and show respect and compassion for each other.

To demonstrate reverence for God and for each and every person in light of the fact that we are all created in His beautiful and mysterious image ----- that's part of what it means to think about and put into practice what is right.

Carrying on in verse 8 ----- "pure".

Think on what is pure --- Paul advises.

Many --- indeed too many things in life are shabby ----- kind of dirty --- soiled ---- sometimes even obscene.

Sometimes we get our minds into such a state that it soils --- or dirties --- it spoils just about everything we think about.

We are called to set our minds --- to focus on things that are pure ----- guard our thoughts such that they are ones we would want to share with our spouse ----- our children ----- those we love and care about and most of all ---- God.

Paul is well aware that it is the nature of the human mind and will to set itself upon something.

Part of what Paul is saying in his letter to the Philippians --- is that we are called to set our minds on the right things.

It's in our very nature to set our minds on something ---- it's just human nature --- we all do it --- or if we are lazy and unreflective it is just done for us and we go along with something unbeknown to us.

So Paul basically says --- “Come on people ---- come on friends --- come on fellow disciples of Christ in Philippi ---- don't just set your minds on anything or be taken by whatever it is that you see around you ----- be better than this --- and choose to set your minds on things of your own choosing --- namely what is right.”

And then of course he goes on to outline a few things that this rightness entails ---- true --- noble ---- right --- pure ---- and now lovely.

Lovely --- what does it mean to focus on something that is lovely?

Many people live in a world of cheques and balances only ---- a world that ultimately will only ever lead to vengeance and punishment.

A world that by its very nature will only ever call forth bitterness and lead to fear.

A world of rebuke and criticism ends up including resentment from others.

And then in contrast to this there is the world of loveliness ---- Christian loveliness.

Kindness --- sympathy --- restraint --- and forgiveness.

Forgiveness.

Perhaps the highest expression of love is forgiveness.

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To be lovely --- to focus on love ----- is to forgive.

Loveliness ---- being forgiving is one of the chief characteristics of a true Christian.

It's not at all ---- in any way possible --- to be Christian ----- without also being radically forgiving.

Radically forgiving.

There are some things we may not be very good at as Christians ---- but forgiving cannot be one of them.

Radical forgiveness is the mark of a vibrant ---- alive ---- and faithful Christian.

Admirable.

What does it mean to think about what is admirable?

And we do well to remember that Paul writes about thinking about these things while in prison.

Paul writes about thinking about these things while in prison.

I myself haven't been in prison --- but I have been to visit a prison --- a number of times.

In Milton near where I last served is Maplehurst Correctional Complex --- the largest correctional facility in Canada.

And I did spent some time in there with inmates.

And one thing they all said ----- without exception ---- was that there is lots of time to think in prison.

Paul --- in advising us to think on these things ---- has chosen them carefully --- as he himself has had a lot of time to think about them while in prison.

Admirable.

Admirable basically means things that are pleasing for God to hear.

There are lots of ugly --- impure --- and foolish words --- and acts in the world.

And none of them are admirable.

On the lips --- and in the mind --- and ultimately also the very actions of Christians are to be words --- thoughts --- and acts that are pleasing to God.

When I'm struggling with something ---- trying to discern what the right thing to do is --- what the rights words are for a certain situation ---- if certain thoughts or words are right or pure --- I often think to myself --- would I want my wife or my kids to know I was thinking this --- would I say this in front of my kids --- or my wife --- and then chiefly I ask myself ----- would I want to say this to God's face ----- would I want to do this to God Himself if He were here right now.

That often clears things up a bit.

That's what admirable speaks of --- things that are pleasing to God --- things we are comfortable doing anywhere to anyone --- and especially to God Himself.

And now finally ----- excellent --- or praiseworthy.

This basically mean perfect.

Try to think and do those things that are perfect in every way.

Those things that are excellent and praiseworthy ---- are basically those things which are perfect.

And in a way this kind of includes all of the other things Paul spoke about as well ---- true – noble ---- right ---- pure --- lovely --- and admirable.

We are to shoot for perfection.

We are to shoot for being perfectly and always --- true --- noble ---- right ---- -- pure ----- lovely --- and admirable.

That's what we're aiming for.

Of all people --- Christians are the very best strivers --- we always shoot for the stars.

All the while aware of the fact that we will often fall short --- and sometimes even fall flat on our faces.

Perfection and nothing less is what we're striving for.

Jesus Christ and nothing less is what we're striving for.

As Christians we don't take the easy road --- picking a goal that is low and easily attainable.

That's not us --- that's for lower standard setting kind of people.

As Christians we don't settle for half done ---- or sub par ----- we shoot for the very best --- we aim for perfection ---- we try to be like Jesus Christ Himself.

Do this --- and ----- as Paul says ---- the God of peace will be with you.

God doesn't expect perfection.

God doesn't expect us to always think on and act out that which is true ---- noble ----- right ---- pure ----- lovely ----- admirable ----- but He does expect us to shoot for this ---- He does expect us to aim high ----- the highest of high ----- Christ.

And only the alive --- and the strong ---- and the bold ---- and the humbly courageous ever take up this great wonderful --- beautiful and mysteriously rewarding and saving journey that is Christian discipleship.

Rejoice in the Lord always Paul says.

How can we not --- when we consider all that it means to live in Christ.

And how can we not when we consider all that it means to try to be like Christ ----- true --- noble ---- right --- pure --- lovely ---- admirable and excellent.

How can we not rejoice ----- when we know that challenges in life --- anxiety --- and stress ---- are only temporary and passing.

The world and circumstances and challenges around us --- despite our very best and true and noble and pure and lovely and admirable and excellent efforts are all just passing ----- eventually all will in fact be true --- and noble ----- and right ----- and pure --- and lovely --- and admirable --- excellent and praiseworthy.

And they will be true --- and noble ----- and right ----- and pure --- and lovely --- and admirable --- excellent and praiseworthy --- when we return into the presence of He who first created us in His image.

God the Father ---- Son --- and Holy Spirit.

Rejoice --- people rejoice.

“Rejoice in the Lord always!” ---- again ----- “Rejoice in the Lord always!”

We are His and He is ours ----- it's all good ---- or at least it will all be good at the time God so wills it.

In the meantime rejoice.

Rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord always ----- and again I say rejoice.

All will be well eternally and finally --- so don't get anxious ----- focus on the right things and peace --- the eternal peace of Christ is ours.

Rejoice in the Lord always.

Amen.