

House Church Message Notes May 31st, 2020 – In Lockdown (8 Weeks in Philippians)

Week 7: Peace in Lockdown (Philippians 4:1-9)

- **Philippians 4:1-3**

- We're coming to the home stretch of our journey through Philippians in Lockdown, as we study the 4th and final chapter this week and next week. So, let's jump right in and open our Bibles to Philippians 4 and start with verses 1 to 3.
- After 11 weeks (if I'm counting right) of not being able to worship together in one place as a church, we've got just two more weeks until many of us will be able to come together to worship, although in a unique way, for Drive-In Church in our parking lot on June 14th. Of course, we still don't know how long it will be until we'll all be safe to worship together *inside* our sanctuary in a way that feels somewhat normal—without all the limitations and precautions that will be required in the months to come. We've got to continue to persevere, stand firm, and seek God for His redemptive possibilities, however long this takes and whatever happens. And if we follow the teachings of this chapter, we will be well on our way to doing just that.
- If you feel discouraged at times by how long this season is winding on, with no clear or specific end in sight—think about Paul again. He and the Philippians had *no* technology which could allow them to hear or see one-another. And to have any kind of communication whatsoever, it took likely days of journeying for a messenger (in this case, Epaphroditus) to carry back and forth words and gifts from one to the other. Epaphroditus literally had to risk his life to accomplish this task, getting sick somehow from the journey, as we read about in chapter 2.
 - It had probably been months (at least) since Paul saw and spoke with the Philippians. And for him, there was no guarantee whether or not he would see them again—let alone whether or not he would be released from prison. Yet, as we come to the close of this letter, we come to some of the most encouraging and positive words in Scripture, as Paul talks to them about being united, rejoicing in the Lord, and standing firm in the peace of God.
- As you read these words then, remember that Paul has not seen these beloved friends for months and none of them know whether or not they will see each other again. Perhaps that's why chapter 4 begins with these words:
- V. 1 *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!*
 - We've seen throughout this letter how endearing this relationship was between Paul and the Philippians church. This was his life's work, his life's mission, his life's reward—a calling directly from Christ Himself. He genuinely loves *and* likes these people—his heart *longs* to be with them, there is a beautiful, life-giving quality to their community that has no earthly comparison.
 - I remember hearing the story of a growing metropolitan church in which a former gang-member had a life-changing encounter with Christ. He gave his life to Jesus, was baptized, and joined the church, leaving behind his old life in the gang. After a few months with the church, he became discouraged the pastor reached out to him. The man lamented the surprising contrast between gang-life and church-life: "In the gang, we lived for each other, we died for each other. We did everything together, it was like a tight-knit family. I thought I would experience something like that in the church, but here, people just show up, act friendly, and go back home." How sad to think that in some cases, gang-culture is a closer comparison of what the church is meant to be than actual church-culture in our nation today.
 - Church life is not meant to be a dry, static network of superficial relationships. It's not a consumer culture, it's not a "country club" culture. These are people whom you will *share life with*. You will laugh and cry together, you will worship the Lord together and experience the intimacy of Christ together, you will rejoice and pray and play together. You will struggle together. You are a family. This is why it's so important for us to go beyond just showing up on a Sunday morning, but to get into a small group, to get into a Discipleship Band, to build genuine relationships with other believers.

- Still, sometimes, with all the diversity of church families and all the messiness of human relationships, this is far easier said than done. Hence, the conflict Paul addresses in the very next verses:
- V. 2-3 *I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*
- How quickly things can go wrong. Family relationships, long-time co-workers, teammates, good friends: with a careless word spoken, with the gradual accumulation of unaddressed grievances, with a difference of opinion—any number of things can tear them apart so quickly. It takes years to build a good friendship or a solid partnership; it takes only a moment to break it apart.
- I'll never forget an experience Emily had while she and I were youth ministry interns at a large church near our college. She was leading a small group of middle school girls. This summer, as new 6th graders were entering the program, they were combining these incoming students with the group Emily had already been meeting with the past year, who were now 7th graders. In the world of middle schoolers, that gap between 7th graders and incoming 6th graders is *an eternity* of difference! During their first combined group meeting, the 7th graders made snide comments the whole night about the “immaturity” of these 6th graders. As they closed the night with prayer, one of the 7th graders volunteered to lead and she proceeded to pray: “dear God, please help these 6th graders to leave and find their own group so we can enjoy our life group again. Amen.” I'll spare you the story of how Emily responded, but if you know her passionate personality, you can imagine for yourself.
- Church can get messy with adults, too. Have you ever witnessed this? Have you ever experienced it? Have you ever participated in it?
- Remember who you are. Remember who they are. Remember what Jesus did. And ask, what would the Lord ask me to do with this damaged relationship?
- The challenging truth is, if you're part of the church, it's not a matter of if, but when, you will be challenged in your relationships with others. The question is, in light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—in light of *all* we have read in this book of Philipians—*how will you respond?* Will it be of Christ, or not? You might not be able to affect what someone else chooses to do, but you do have a choice of what you'll do. Your attitude. Your actions. Your words. *How will you respond?*
- **Philippians 4:4-7**
- V. 4-5 *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*
- Here we get to some of the most “feel-good” messages of the whole book—and already it's been a pretty encouraging read, hasn't it? But this is more than just shallow, self-help fluff. This is Gospel truth coming through a life rooted in the Gospel; this is coming from a messenger of God who gave up his life for the cause.
- First, he says “Rejoice!” We've heard this command repeatedly, but here it is the most forcefully stated. “Rejoice in the Lord *always*. I will say it again: rejoice!” Did you catch that?...

• ... **REJOICE!**

- We talked a little bit about this last week: the command to “rejoice” reminds us that joy in the Lord is more than a feeling, but a choice. The word here doesn't just mean that internal sense of joy welling up in response to an external experience of God or some blessing—it's more fully a command to *celebrate*—the implication is *public celebration*. Celebrate the Lord! Do something!
- It's not positive-thinking or sugar-coating, it's not a spiritual placebo effect. In truth, we have reason to celebrate the Lord in every moment, because regardless of the difficulty of our circumstances, His character, His nature, and our future with Him, do not change! And He is near. So, we can truly celebrate.

- Researches have actually found that the physical act of smiling, even if you're not happy, increases your mood. You can make yourself just a little happier by choosing to smile.
- What if we applied that to celebrating the Lord? It really does work to powerful effect. Try it! You can even just repeat out loud several times, *"Father, I celebrate you! Jesus, I celebrate you! Holy Spirit, I celebrate you! Praise the Lord!"*
- V. 6-7 *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.*
 - This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture—because it's so encouraging, it's so practical, and it's so simple to actually put into practice. When I'm talking with people in the church who are facing hard times, I like to call this the *"Philippians Prescription"* because it kind of works that way if you put it into practice.
 - Take the situation your facing—whatever great or small thing might be causing you trouble and reason to worry—and consider the energy you're expending by worrying about it. Anxiety becomes such a consuming thing. It robs our moment to moment focus and energy. But become aware of the fact that you are worrying, and in that moment, choose to take the energy that your mind is giving to thinking about whatever that worry is, and *redirect that energy to prayer, giving your specific requests to God, giving your gratitude to God—and keep doing that until you experience God's peace.* Once again, this really works. Try it!
 - No, this is not to downplay the reality of clinically diagnosed anxiety, nor the weight of the profound struggles we really do face in this life. Remember Paul's life—he knew about all this!
 - But, what happens is, as you pray, giving your requests and thanks to God, your attention ever so gradually slips from that struggle you're holding onto, and you start to pay attention to God. You start to remember who God is—how much greater God is than even the *greatest* struggle you could be facing. And as you behold the Father enthroned above all, who loves you, the Son who sits at His right hand, and the Holy Spirit who dwells within you—you experience the only thing you could possibly experience with His presence meeting your needs: **peace**. The *peace of God which surpasses all understanding.*
 - Do you want that peace? Do you really want it? Seek God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. He doesn't promise that our lives on earth will be easy or that He will take away every struggle at the moment we face it—but He does promise to give us peace and to give us everything we need to navigate this life.
- **Philippians 4:8-9**
 - V. 8-9 *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.*
 - What you give your attention to determines who you will become. Plain and simple. *What you give the most attention to has the most impact on the person you are.* And if you haven't noticed, a lot of the message Philippians has been about focusing our attention on *Jesus*.
 - N.T. Wright has a great comment on this passage that we'll close with now: *"The command in verse 8, to think about all the wonderful and lovely things listed here, runs directly opposite to the habits of mind instilled by the modern media. Read the newspapers: their stock-in-trade is anything that is untrue, unholy, unjust, impure, ugly, of ill repute, vicious and blameworthy. Is that a true representation of God's good and beautiful world? How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How are you going to take steps to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?"*
 - So, what are your thinking about these days?
 - Paul finishes the passage, *"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."* May it be so with us. Amen.