

21st Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon #283
Philippians 4:4-13
Erich Jonathan Hoeft

Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, 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. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if anything is excellent, and if anything is praiseworthy, think about these things. The things that you learned, received, heard, and saw in me: Keep doing these things. And the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoice greatly in the Lord now that you have revived your concern for me once again. Actually, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I lack anything; in fact, I have learned to be content in any circumstances in which I find myself. I know what it is to live in humble circumstances, and I know what it is to have more than enough. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, while being full or hungry, while having plenty or not enough. I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.

In the name of Christ Jesus, dear friends and fellow Redeemed,

What a text! What an amazing text! These verses from Paul's letter to the Philippians are packed with instruction and inspiration and encouragement. What a comfort for the believer! What a challenge for the preacher! What a challenge for the preacher who wants to do justice to these Spirit-inspired words! In ten verses Paul touches on at least seven different subjects.

I knew that I couldn't possibly cover everything in this text in twenty minutes or less. But at the same time I didn't want to leave anything out. And so as I was preparing for this sermon the question I kept asking myself was this: How do all of these things fit together?

I have to confess that I don't know exactly what Paul was thinking when he wrote these words, but I did discover a common thread that connects these seemingly independent thoughts. Everything that Paul has to say to us this evening/morning applies to what is sometimes described as lifestyle witnessing.

Lifestyle witnessing is the idea that Christians let their lights shine in the world by the way they live their lives. We believe that **“faith comes from hearing the message”** (Romans 10:17), but we also recognize that our actions have an impact (positive or negative) on the people around us. As someone once said: “You may be the only Bible another person ever reads.”

This evening/morning I’d like you to take a moment and think of friends, neighbors, even family members who you know that maybe don’t have a church home. I challenge you to ask one of them to come to a church service with you this month. As you consider who you might invite, it is good to remember the importance of lifestyle witnessing. Our attitudes and actions will never replace the soul-saving gospel, but God can use them to open doors for us to share the good news about Jesus.

As we sit at the apostle’s feet this evening/morning, as we strive to be salt and light in this sinful world, and in anticipation of our own witnessing, I believe that it is very appropriate to view these words as...

PAUL’S PRIMER FOR LIFESTYLE WITNESSING

- I. Be joyful
- II. Be prayerful
- III. Be thoughtful
- IV. Be thankful

Imagine that you are a first-time visitor at this service. Pastor Hoeft has just announced the final hymn, “I Love To Tell The Story” (CW 562). As you look around you, you notice a couple people yawning. The person next to you keeps looking at his watch. And as the singing begins, it sounds more like a funeral dirge than an evangelism anthem.

Would you believe that the people in the pew believe what they are saying? Would you be convinced that they love to tell the story “of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love?” Or would you be skeptical?

I am not saying that we have to have smiles on our faces from the opening hymn to the closing benediction. I am not expecting everyone to jump up and down and shout “Hallelujah.” But at the same time, our faith cannot be separated from our emotions. The threats of the law strike fear in our hearts. The promises of the gospel fill our hearts with joy.

Feel the emotion in Paul’s words when he declares: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice”** (4)! According to Paul, Christians always have reason to rejoice. We are to be joyful every minute of every hour of every day.

But joy doesn’t come from within. And it doesn’t become ours through the power of positive thinking. We cannot equate it with happiness. We rejoice “in the Lord.” We have joy because our Lord is also our Savior. We have joy because we have the forgiveness of sins. We have joy because we have peace with God. And we have joy because we know that **“the Lord is near”** (5). He is always by our side, and each new day brings us one day closer to the time when he will take us to be at his side.

And when that kind of eternal, unchangeable joy fills your heart, it will naturally spill over into your words and actions. It will show in the way you do your job. It will show in the way you treat your neighbors. It will show in the way you respond to adversity. And other people will notice. Who knows? They might even be bold enough to ask you what it is that makes you different.

Paul’s first lesson in lifestyle witnessing is quite simple. Be joyful. But you and I both know that this is easier said than done. What about those days when we don’t feel very joyful? What about those times when we have more questions than answers? What about those situations when the cares and concerns of life threaten to rob us of our joy? Paul had this answer for the Philippians: Be prayerful.

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (6). Is the Christian life free from trouble? Of course not. Will we have our moments

of worry? Will we encounter obstacles? Will we struggle? Yes. In that respect, children of God are no different from anyone else.

But Christians have this advantage. We can take our problems to the all-seeing, all-knowing, almighty Creator of the universe. In fact, he wants us to. He says: **“Call upon me in the day of trouble”** (Psalm 50:15). He invites us to cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for us (I Peter 5:7).

And to our prayers he attaches this promise: **“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”** (7). Even though our lives are far from perfect, we have peace. Even though we don’t understand why the things that trouble us are happening in our lives, we have peace. Even when we feel the weakest, even when we appear to be the most vulnerable, we are safe and secure in the loving arms of our Savior.

And the closer we are to him, the more we will pray to him. We will pray for ourselves. We will pray for the people we love. We will pray for people we don’t even know. And as one pastor put it, we will be willing to “pray dangerously.”

To pray dangerously means to pray for opportunities to share your faith with others. That kind of prayer probably won’t put you in any physical danger, but if you ask the Lord for opportunities to witness you shouldn’t be surprised if He answers your prayers.

Today I ask you to pray dangerously. Ask God to open doors for you to witness at home, at school, at work, wherever he leads you. And in the coming weeks, look for opportunities to invite someone to church so that they can hear what you hear, so that they can know what you know, so that they can have what you have.

Prayer may not be very visible, but it is still an important part of lifestyle witnessing. Another component that is no more visible and no less important comes in the verses that follow. Paul gives us this encouragement: Be thoughtful.

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if anything is excellent, and if anything is praiseworthy, think about these things” (8).

When it comes to watching television, the viewer has all kinds of options. There are news channels, sports channels, educational channels, movie channels, etc. And of course Netflix, Hulu, FireTV, and the like give us everything at our fingertips or even just tell Alexa what you want to watch and she will queue it up for you! Some programming is good, but much of it is not. And studies have shown that constant exposure to certain images can have a negative effect on behavior. What’s the simple solution? Stick with the good stuff.

The same basic principle applies on a broader spiritual level. Every day we make choices. We decide what we will watch, what we will read, where we will go. To a certain extent we have the ability to filter what goes in and what stays out.

Paul encourages us to filter out those things that have the potential to harm faith and fill our minds with those things that build up faith. When reading a book or watching a movie, ask yourself: Is this true? Is this pure? Is this worthy of praise? How would I be feeling if Jesus were sitting next to me?

And even if it doesn’t seem obvious at first, there is a connection between what we think about and what we think about witnessing. If our thoughts are consumed by earthly things, or even worse, if our minds are filled with sinful urges and desires, there is less room and less time for spiritual things. And if our own spiritual life is not a priority, it stands to reason that we won’t be all that concerned about the spiritual welfare of others.

Lifestyle witnessing is not something Christians do. It is a reflection of what we are. That doesn’t mean we have to be perfect people. We aren’t perfect. We will never be perfect. But Jesus was. Jesus lived a perfect life for us. Jesus gave up his life for us. Jesus won eternal salvation for us. His love motivates us to respond, and this response is perhaps the most natural

and most effective form of lifestyle witnessing. And this brings us to Paul's final word of encouragement: Be thankful.

When Paul wrote these words, he was a prisoner in Rome. He didn't know if he would live or die. But he didn't complain. He didn't blame God. A life in the Lord's service, a ministry with many ups and downs, led Paul to trust in God no matter what the circumstances.

He said: **"I know what it is to live in humble circumstances, and I know what it is to have more than enough. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, while being full or hungry, while having plenty or not enough"** (12).

Paul's life was hanging in the balance, but he wasn't nervous. He wasn't anxious. He wasn't afraid. He was thankful. He knew that **"to live is Christ and to die is gain"** (Philippians 1:21). He knew that if Jesus was the only thing he had, he still had everything.

Imagine the encouragement the Philippians received from Paul's words. Imagine the strength they received from Paul's example. And just try to imagine the many witnessing opportunities Paul had during his time in Rome. He came into contact with soldiers and servants and leaders. And when they saw Paul, they saw a man at peace.

How did he do it? How was he able to hold up? How was he able to stand firm? How was he able to be content at all times? This was Paul's secret: **"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me"** (13). And what was true for the apostle Paul is also true for us.

God is our refuge and strength. God gives us the strength to do what we could never do by ourselves. He gives us the ability to be thankful. He gives us the strength to say no to sin. He can even give us the courage to walk up to someone and strike up a conversation about Jesus.

A day is coming when Jesus will return to this earth to judge all people. His verdict will be based on the presence or absence of faith in people's hearts.

We don't know when that day will come, but the fact that it is coming makes the work God has given us more important than ever.

God has called each of us to be his witnesses in the world. And as soon as we walk out the church doors this evening/morning, we will enter the mission field. If that sounds kind of scary, if that sounds a bit intimidating, please read and re-read these words of Paul. He wrote them to encourage us and motivate us and remind us what lifestyle witnessing is all about. Fellow Christian witnesses, be joyful. Be prayerful. Be thoughtful. Be thankful. Amen.