

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

9 The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

Rejoice in the Lord

Philippians 4:4-7

We looked at John last week, so I wanted to look at the passage from Philippians because I feel it has something important to say to us. The book of Philippians is one of the most positive of the new testament letters, and yet it is written by Paul from prison in chains, at about the time that the emperor Nero was starting to feed christians to the lions. We need to keep this situation at the front of our minds, at the same time remembering that he is appealing to the church at Philippi to maintain their unity. This short passage is part of Paul's closing appeal for steadfastness in the face of disunity. So the theme of this short passage, rejoice in the Lord, might seem to be a bit of a puzzle. How can Paul possibly be so positive? Thinking back to the portrayal of christians we have become so used to ever since the 1960s, of kumbayah and campfires, limp handshakes and terrible jumpers, and TV vicars who are just an object of gentle ridicule, we might think now that we are very naive to be all positive and joyous, especially in the sort of world we now live in where so many people are struggling. We should surely be more grounded, and not invite further ridicule. There are those who seriously feel we need to be less light hearted and more austere. We might think that in view of the wholesale abandonment of faith in God that goes on around us, that it's time for a rethink.

The fact is that God's Spirit grows in us a depth of character which can embrace both positivity and realism about the world. We can be rejoicing in the Lord but at the same time have a sense of gravity and understanding of life's challenges, while not being either annoyingly jolly or depressingly intense. Christians who always have victory over everything can be annoying, and it's actually not at all what Paul means when he says rejoice always. But neither does he call for more seriousness – if we think Jesus had no sense of humour we haven't read the gospels properly.

Throughout this letter Paul is being realistic about how we should behave in the face of problems, particularly disunity. 'Do not be anxious about anything'. 'Do everything without grumbling or arguing'. 'Let your gentleness be evident to all'. But also 'be steadfast', 'be fearless', 'stand firm'. This I think is as much in relation to specific people as to the general situation. There were conflicts going on within the fellowship at Phillippi which needed resolving. Some, Paul says, preached Christ out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Alec Motyer in his commentary says "The *public success* of the church along the front where it faces the world depends upon the measure of sanctification (growth in Christlikeness) of *each individual christian*". So not just the leadership, but every believer. And by public success he doesn't just mean attendance figures, but maybe more importantly respect and acknowledgement of the gospel message,

brought about by the fact of our love for one another and that we are seen to love and support and contribute to our communities.

Somewhere in all this there is a middle way which imitates Jesus, a mixture of humility and confidence. A lack of arrogant certainty and a depth of humility and faith. This all comes about through allowing the Holy Spirit to shape our character rather than desperately striving to be good or holy. Holiness is very misunderstood as a quality - if you look at Jesus he was not pious or self righteous in the way we sometimes expect 'holy' people to be. Real holiness often goes unnoticed, but in the life of Jesus it not only exposed lies and hypocrisy, but brought true healing and wholeness to all those he encountered.

So if we look at Paul's prescription again it's very clear:

Rejoice in the Lord. So not in your own strength or imagined holiness but in the Lord, making him the object of your joy.
Let your gentleness be evident to all. It's not an accident that he chooses gentleness. This is a significant fruit of the Spirit.
Don't be anxious. Instead, pray and be thankful to God

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.