

I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Philippians, Chapter 4 verses 2-7. This can be found on page 833 in your pew Bibles. We continue in "The Joy of Unity" series. Scripture reveals the solution to Joy thieves.

Our Fathers Word

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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.

Finally, brothers, 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. 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.

-NIV

The word of God for the people of God

Within the past few years, I've discovered an amazing way that God is working in my life. From time to time, whenever I'm going to preach about a particular topic, God allows me to personally experience it. I think that you should know...this is not always fun! From my perspective, God seems to be setting up circumstances in order to provide the opportunity to live out the principles that I'm teaching, before I preach on the topic. This usually means that my wife, Christy, also has to live through these experiences.

It is so amazing how the living word is *truly* just **that**. The *living* Word. This same thing happened as we began this current series through Philippians. It's as if God kept looking down on us saying, "Well, Ray and Christy, do you have joy?" This, of course, happened while several challenging circumstances came crashing into our lives.

The question I think God wanted us to face is this: Do we really *believe* His Word, or is it just good advice? It's one thing to *admire* the Apostle Paul's joy while he was chained to a Roman soldier, but it's entirely a whole different thing to *have* joy myself when life is stormy.

This is the sixth week in our "Joy of Unity" series. We have learned some exciting principles to help us find joy when life gets messy. Today we'll discover three more joy producing principles. In fact, today's passage may be the most helpful joy resource in the entire book of Philippians!

Our text offers solutions for three of life's biggest joy thieves. Do you know what joy thieves are? Joy thieves are things that suck the joy out of us. We can be surrounded by them all day long. You know exactly what I'm referring to. You get up one morning after a great night's sleep, You're ready for a fine day.

But as you bounce into the kitchen to get your first cup of coffee you notice there's a huge puddle of water under the refrigerator. It quit working the night before so you have to buy a new one. That can be a joy thief. You load the dishwasher, and it decides not to turn on when you try to start it, joy thief.

You're running late to work, so you drive a little faster than you should. Suddenly you see a flashing light behind you...and the officer doesn't give you a break this time. As you drive away with your very expensive citation, *it* can be a joy thief. Once you arrive at work your boss informs you the company is suspending all overtime. You'd been using your overtime to help pay for the recent price increase in gasoline, getting you to and from work. No longer having the extra pay could be a real joy thief.

Joy thieves are the curveballs of life. They can make us want to stay in bed and curl-up into a fetal position. They can turn our smile's into frowns, our enthusiasm into depression. They can kill the spring in our step, and cause us to withdraw from life. They can literally paralyze us with fear and anxiety.

So, what can we do about them? I recall a T-shirt that used to say "Life Happens." And boy oh boy, does life happen. We can't stop the stuff of life from happening. Life happens. There's nothing we can do about that. Curveballs are going to keep coming until we get to heaven. Your life and my life is not going to be perfect until then. So, this morning, let's explore God's Word, as the Apostle Paul reveals how to overcome three of life's biggest joy thieves. (Read 4:2-9)

In verses 2&3 Paul is dealing with the Philippians disunity as he tells two women in the church to get along with each other. Their relationship has soured.

From the text we observe that these women were not outsiders; they were active participants in the church. We also see that the issue dividing the women was not doctrinal. If it had been, Paul would have resolved it by siding with one or the other. Also, Paul knows both their names: Euodia and Syntyche. This suggests they were prominent in the church. Perhaps both women were present as Paul preached on the banks of the river when Lydia first became a Christ-follower.

Paul urges them to “agree with each other.” This was important because their dispute was causing dissension in the rest of the congregation. It always does. When two people are at odds in a church, it doesn’t just affect those two people. There’s a ripple effect. Their disharmony and lack of unity also affects their friends, and the friends of their friends, and so on.

That’s why God takes so seriously the issue of disharmony. We see this, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1:10. “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you may agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” Division undermines the spiritual unity that God intends. Disharmony introduces negativity that makes it difficult for the Holy Spirit to move among us. All this to say, division, disunity, disharmony are serious issues to God!

So much so, Paul urges someone to help the two women reconcile. Paul mentions several other people specifically by name in this passage, Paul is asking someone named Syzygus to help the two women work out their differences. Maintaining harmony is so important in the church that if we can’t work things out ourselves, then by all means, we should get a third party to help. Now the joy thief here is sour relationships.

When we get cross-wise with someone else it puts a damper on just about everything. I know this may surprise you, but not too long ago, Christy and I got our wires crossed. The hard part was I had to preach that weekend about joy. All weekend long I kept hearing God ask, “Ray, where’s *your* joy?” I felt like looking up and saying, “God, help me get my joy back!” In fact, that’s precisely what I did, pray.

Sour relationships do that, don’t they? They steal our joy! So what can we do about this? What’s the solution for the joy thief called sour relationships? Look back at verse 2. You might underline the phrase “agree with each other.” That’s the key. That’s the solution to sour relationships. Literally this means “to be of the same mind.” This is a call to live in unity, and in harmony with each other. We could also put it this way: Get along with people.

For some of us this is easier than others. My wife can get along with almost anyone—except for me when I’m being a knucklehead. But not everyone is like Christy. Some of us are like porcupines. The closer we get to people the more we poke and irritate them.

But regardless if this comes easily or not, it’s worth the work to try to get along with people. And it’s worth the effort to resolve things if we’re at odds with someone. In my mind, I can imagine how it might have been in the church at Philippi. Everyone knew that Euodia and Syntyche were not speaking to each other. Their conflict made it uncomfortable for everyone in the church. Maybe the two women sat in different places in the worship center. Maybe they tried not to make eye contact when they were in the same room. Maybe as they talked with mutual friends they would avoid bringing up each other’s name.

Sometimes we think it's easier to pretend there's nothing wrong when we have an issue with someone. We bury our head and hope to wake up and find everything is better.

But that doesn't happen in real life. Paul pleads with both women to deal with reality and "agree with each other." This takes work. Getting along with others won't be easy. Ephesians 4:3 tells us to "Make every effort to keep the unity in the bond of peace." Making every effort to keep the unity includes going the second mile, or even the third and fourth mile in some cases.

It means not just forgiving someone seven times, but seventy times seven times. God calls us to "forgive each other just as in Christ God forgave you." The next time you think about refusing to forgive someone, take a long look in the mirror and think about how much God has forgiven you. Jesus makes a very sobering statement in Matthew 6:15. "But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

So the first joy thief in our passage is sour relationships. And the solution is this: get along with people. Usually this means extending lots of grace. Keep in mind that sometimes God brings difficult people into our lives to teach us. Left to ourselves, we'd like to get rid of these difficult people. We'd like to brush them aside or ignore them. But God doesn't let us do that. Everyone in God's family matters, not just those we get along with easily. So, in Paul's words in verse 2 "agree with each other." Get along with people. Why? It will increase your joy!

A second major joy thief is worry. Have you ever laid awake at night worrying about something? I know I have! Joy and worry are like oil and water.

They don't mix. If I am worrying about something, it's almost impossible to have joy. That's what makes verses 4-6 so relevant.

Anytime a word is repeated in the Bible it should catch our attention. In verse 4 rejoice is repeated twice. Both times it's a command form of the verb in the present tense. The present tense in Greek carries the idea of an ongoing activity. Our rejoicing is to be an ongoing part of our day-to-day lifestyle. Friends, this is a call to supernatural living! Typically, most of us are joyful when things are going well, but we don't have much joy when things aren't going well. Raise your hand if that's your experience.

In verse 4 God calls us to a lifestyle of joy that remains steady regardless of our circumstances. Remember Paul was writing this while he was chained to a Roman soldier! Apparently his adverse circumstances didn't put a damper on his joy. This raises a question. How was Paul able to do that? How could he sustain joy when his circumstances were so rotten?

I think a key is found in verse 5. I'd like you to remember the phrase "the Lord is near." This is a truth that anchors everything else in this paragraph. If God is near, we can rejoice no matter how hard things get. Knowing God is near—if we remember it—makes all the difference. Why? Because if God is by our side, then we've got nothing to worry about! He can handle every one of our concerns.

About twenty-four months ago, I was inspired to start-up a business. While I am a master of my trade, pest control, I really didn't know much about running a business. So, I'm sure many of you would agree with me when I say this was a tremendous risk, and it came with more stress and worry than I was accustomed to, or had anticipated.

To tell you the truth, somedays I really didn't know what I was doing, but I was committed to making my vocation my mission, the company grow, and thrive. The first year, things went well, but the reality of doing this on my own started to take its toll on me. Concern led to stress, stress led to worry, worry led to anxiety. I realized that I was only one wrong-decision away from making a good situation, go from good to bad. That first year I continued to rely upon the one truth I could trust. God was near, I knew He was with me in this venture. So, I did what I knew to do, I prayed. In fact, I prayed a lot! Then I would focus ahead on the task at hand, and not look back.

But my second year in business I did things differently. Identifying my strengths and my weaknesses, I recruited help. Dan, my CFO was on my right side, and Amy, my office administrator was on my left side. Their presence at my side made all the difference! If anything went wrong, I knew they'd be able to assist me and lend support. They were committed, knowledgeable, and filled with enthusiasm during the work day. Because I knew they were there with me, at my side, I didn't let my weaknesses or my anxiety become my failure. I settled right down, got a good focus on our goals, and kept it through the year.

Now magnify that same idea by saying...infinity! It's not Dan who's next to you, or Amy. It's God who is near! The same God who promises his children "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mat28:10) The same God who promises Christ-followers, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Heb13:5) This makes a huge difference especially in times of trouble.

We kept servicing our customers—we keep hanging on—because we know that God is with us. "The Lord is near," Paul says. Joy becomes possible, then, not

because everything is peachy. Joy is possible because of the deep-down confidence that God is near. Thus, it can be well with our soul no matter what circumstance we face.

A few years ago, at a press conference in a Milwaukee hospital on TV, this story unfolded. A man had been driving his van on the freeway with his family. A piece of metal fell off a truck puncturing their fuel tank. The van ignited almost instantly. The man and his wife escaped, along with one or two of their children. But they watched helplessly as the rest of their children perished in the flaming vehicle. It was a horrific traffic accident. But at the news conference a few days later, the dad spoke confidently about God's goodness. Over and over again he declared his complete trust in the love of God he had experienced through his faith in Jesus Christ.

How is that kind of triumphant attitude possible? Well, the grieving father remembered that the Lord was near. Worry, anxiety and fretting will steal our joy every time. The solution is to remember that God is near. If we've accepted Christ, he's with us. He won't leave us. In fact, if you're his child, the Bible says God holds you in the palm of his hand. Nothing will ever happen without first passing through his loving fingers.

A third joy thief is negativity. I've mentioned this several times in this series. What we think about affects virtually everything about our life. Why? Because thoughts lead to words; words lead to actions; actions lead to habits; habits shape our character and character shapes our destiny. So, our destiny begins with our thought life. (Read 4:8)

Finally, brothers, 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.*

The challenge we face is that virtually everything around us is negative. Most of the news on TV and radio is negative. What we read in the newspapers is mostly negative. We're heading into a presidential campaign that will probably be the most negative campaign in history. Many of us spend our day at work and much of what people talk about is negative. The weather is too hot; then it's too cold. One thing after another! All of this will wear us down, and, before we know it, we're sounding negative like everyone else.

It reminds me of a boohoo-me song I used to sing when I was a kid. "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me. I'm going to the garden to eat worms. Long, slim slimy ones short fat juicy ones. I'm going to the garden to eat worms!"

Once we start down the negativity road, we start looking at life as a glass half empty. Nothing is as good as it could be. We pick and snipe at people. We develop the spiritual gift of criticism. All of this steals our joy! Studies have shown time and time again that people with a positive attitude enjoy life more, they laugh more and they live longer.

Verse 8 is the solution to overcome negativity. "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Bible teachers have often observed that the supreme example of each of these characteristics is Jesus. Jesus is true. Jesus is noble. Jesus is right. He's pure, he's lovely and he's admirable. Jesus is also excellent and praiseworthy. Thus, one way we can develop Philippians 4:8 thinking is to focus our thoughts on Jesus.

But this type of focused thinking requires mental muscle. Left alone, our thoughts will not drift in a God-ward direction. Just the opposite! They'll drift downward into a cesspool of negativity. It takes both personal effort and God's grace to reverse this trend. Scripture says, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." This is our part—the diligence we apply to refocus our thought-life in a godly direction. "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure." This is God's part in the process of our transformation. This is the grace God gives to energize us to want to change.

Thus, we find in our passage practical steps to overcome life's three biggest joy thieves. (1) Instead of drowning in sour relationships, learn to get along with people. This will probably require giving others a whole lot of grace—like the grace God has given you. (2) Stop worrying. Jesus says, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27) In other words, cut it out! Worry doesn't help you or anybody else. Remember God is near. Don't be anxious about anything, but pray about everything. (3) Get rid of the negativity. Muscle your thoughts away from the negative and begin thinking more like God—be positive, rejoice with joy, God is near.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you Lord for being with us at all times,

for your continual presence in our lives.

Thank you for your love, and your grace, for

giving us your peace and joy that makes all the difference

in how we experience life in Christ Jesus.

Give us the strength to forgive others when they have offended us,

help us keep our relationships from souring,

keeping them centered in love, grace, and forgiveness.

Forgive us Lord for the times when our minds are trapped in negativity.

Deliver our minds from worldly stress, anxiety, and worry.

Allow our joy to be our witness that we have

faith in your tender and merciful care, that we have

faith in your perfect plan of salvation through our Lord Jesus.

AMEN