

Choose Joy!
A Life Group Study Through the Book of Philippians

Suggested Weekly Outline for Fall 2022

Session 1 (Sept 10–16): Choose Joy?
Philippians 1:1–11

Session 2 (Sept 17–23): Choose Joy Today!
Philippians 1:12–18a; 2:19–30

Session 3 (Sept 24–30): Choose Joy in Life or Death!
Philippians 1:18b–30

Session 4 (Oct 1–7): Choose Joy by Choosing Humility!
Philippians 2:1–11

Session 5 (Oct 8–14): Choose Joy by Choosing Obedience!
Philippians 2:12–18

Session 6 (Oct 15–21): Choose Joy by Knowing Jesus!
Philippians 3:1–11

Session 7 (Oct 22–28): Choose Joy by Persevering!
Philippians 3:12–4:1

Session 8 (Oct 29–Nov 4): What Stops You from Choosing Joy?
Philippians 4:2–9

Session 9 (Nov 5–11): Choose Joy No Matter What!
Philippians 4:10–23

Choose Joy! **A Brief Introduction to Philippians**

Acts 16 recounts the story of Paul starting the church in Philippi. One night, as Paul was sleeping, he had a vision of a man standing shouting, “Cross over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). Paul immediately made plans to go and first reached the major city of Philippi. There were three “gospel scenes” that defined his arrival:

First, at the city gates, Paul met Lydia, a rich woman who had accepted the general idea of Israel’s God but knew nothing of Jesus. Paul preached the gospel and the Lord opened her heart. Lydia, alongside her entire family, was saved and baptized.

Second, while they were staying with Lydia, a demon-possessed, fortune-telling slave girl came to heckle Paul. He turned to her and cast out the demon. But her owners were upset because they made a lot of money from her fortune-telling, and now that her demon was gone, their hope for profit was gone. Those slaveholding men complained to the city officials and Paul and Silas were dragged in front of the council, beaten with rods, flogged and then thrown in jail.

Third, in jail, there was a violent earthquake and all the jail cells were opened. Fearing the consequences of allowing a mass-prisoner escape, the jailer set out to kill himself. But Paul interrupted, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here” (Acts 16:28). Because of this miraculous scene, the jailer and his family come to know the saving power of Jesus and were baptized.

This background in Acts 16 reveals the persistence of God to reach this city with the good news that salvation has come. The beginnings of the church in Philippi are a reminder that the Lord works relentlessly to see the salvation of His people. Furthermore, the stories indicate that whether you are rich (Lydia), a poor slave (demon-possessed girl), or somewhere in between (jailer), every person longs for the joy brought through salvation!

Most scholars agree that though Philippians was written over a decade after Paul had established the church in Philippi, his joy-filled message never changed. As Paul writes from his own chains, his constant refrain is “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice” (Phil 4:4)! He makes it clear: Though the world promises fleeting happiness, true Joy is found only in Jesus.

This present study breaks down the book of Philippians into nine sessions, utilizing teaching curriculum, videos and discussion questions to help unpack this central theme. As we read and study every verse, may we become so

overwhelmed with the gospel that it infiltrates our hearts and our minds and we overflow with His joy!

Week 1 (Sept 10–16): Choose Joy? **Philippians 1:1–11**

To “choose joy” simply means this: every believer has the opportunity to be joyful and choose to rejoice no matter life’s situations and circumstances. How is this possible? Because the good news of the Gospel is just that good!

Joy is a Christian distinctive. Anyone can be happy when things go their way. But what about when they don’t? What about when life is hard, it’s a struggle and you feel constrained? Do you still choose joy?

In this first lesson, we will provide a little background to Paul’s letter to the Philippian believers. Then, by analyzing his prayer for them, we will unpack three challenges every believer can embrace so that their life is marked by joy.

Philippians 1:1–2

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:
² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Philippians 1:7–8

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul writes the book of Philippians in chains under Roman imprisonment. Normally, these circumstances would cause anger, anxiety or the like. But for Paul, he instead uses the circumstances to write the book of joy. Even in physical chains, he saw himself first and foremost as a “servant” or a “slave” of Christ Jesus. He invites these fellow saints and sufferers to have the same joy he had.

Paul loved these people. He was thankful for their faithfulness and longed to see them. Given this good relationship, Paul prays some incredible truths over the Philippians in the opening verses. These truths provide three spiritual challenges that every believer can choose to accept:

Challenge #1: PARTNER in the Gospel

Philippians 1:4–5

I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...

Paul considers the people of Philippi to be partners in the Gospel. This word partner carries with it the idea of fellowship, that they have a shared mission and vision. In this way, Paul communicates that these believers were coworkers in the gospel.

How do we “partner” in the gospel? First, consider that every believer is called to be a partner! Gospel partnership is not limited to the role of pastor or someone in ministry. Ephesians 4:12 indicates that leaders in the church are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.” We have opportunities all around us to be a faithful witness to Jesus, join the work of ministry and build up the church. We cannot neglect our call for gospel participation.

Second, we should share Paul’s vision: salvation is good enough for all people; therefore, it should be shared with all people and can be reflected in all circumstances. As believers, we must learn to believe, live and preach the reality that Jesus is better than anything this world has to offer. Whether at work, in your home, in your church or around our communities, we must embrace the challenge to participate in the gospel.

Challenge #2: WALK CONFIDENTLY in the Lord’s Work

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul’s confidence in the Lord’s work is incredible. Since Acts 16, Paul has seen the Lord do great things in and through the people of Philippi and he is fully confident in the Lord’s abilities to make good on His promises.

When the Lord calls you to be a partner, He calls you to walk in the same kind of confidence. The Lord is the initiator, the sustainer and the finisher of His work. We are the vessels by which He accomplishes His work. To say it slightly different: If the Lord has called you to something, then He will carry it out as well. Our goal is to be faithful, obedient and depend upon the Lord.

God’s plans are never thwarted and He desires to use us. As we partner in the gospel, the Lord will call us to do what only He can do. We are simply called to walk confidently in the Lord, believing that He who began a good work will carry it on to completion.

Challenge #3: GROW in Your Love for God and Others

Philippians 1:9-11

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Paul is not praying as though they are in trouble or even lacking, but his desire is for them to continue to grow in the Lord. One of the greatest prayers we can pray is to grow in our knowledge and love for God. We must pray that our affections and concern for the Lord and His ways would increase as we learn who God is. This is the kind of love for God that lays the foundation for our love for others.

Initially, Paul prays for three growth areas for the Philippians: knowledge, insight and discernment. Our theology drives our godly practice. Our understanding of God drives how we obey God. Throughout the Bible, God is revealing Himself to us and is calling His people to know Him by staying connected to Him.

As the Lord allows us to know Him more, He calls us to reflect Him with godly character and fruitful living. Being pure and blameless is not a mandate for perfection so much as it is a pursuit of things that are superior (Col 3:2). Knowing God lets us properly evaluate our world and our culture by asking: Is this word or action honoring to Jesus? Furthermore, pure and blameless tie back to verse 6 as it reflects the character of one who is confidently and faithfully obedient. We must live in His grace, depend on His forgiveness and pursue a relationship with Jesus over and over again.

When we know God and reflect this knowledge in our character, we live a fruit-filled life. The passage echoes Jesus's words in John 15: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The more we abide and remain in Jesus, the more we will look like Jesus. Know God, be transformed through this knowledge and then produce the fruit of righteousness. We cannot flip this order! The gospel is all about becoming who Christ has made you to be through His finished work. A person who has not been transformed by the gospel cannot produce the fruit of the gospel. Instead, our knowledge of God becomes our motivation for a transformed character that works itself out in transformed actions.

Are you ready to accept the challenge?

Discussion Questions:

- Where do people today often look to find joy? How is that different from Paul's view of joy?
- What does Paul specifically call out about his Philippian church members that brings him such joy? How does that compare to the way you interact with or think about people at our church?
- Where is God calling you to partner with Him?
- Who are those you partner with in the gospel that bring you joy? Why?
- How does Philippians 1:6 inspire and stir confidence in you?
- Why is discernment (v.10) an important part of the Christian life? How do we gain discernment?
- Why should you strive to grow in your love for God?
- What are ways that you have found to help you grow in your love for God and others?
- How do you discern what is good, pure and blameless?
- Which of these three challenges is hardest to accept?

Week 2 (Sept 17–23): Choose Joy Today! **Philippians 1:12–18a; 2:19–30**

Learning the “Hard Way” is the process of discovering what we need to know through experience and/or by making mistakes. While sometimes this way of learning is necessary in life, it is often easier (and better!) to learn something by looking at the example of someone else. We need people in our lives to show us how to do a variety of undertakings and the Christian life is no exception.

How do we learn to read the Bible? How do we learn how to pray? Many of us had a mentor, pastor, friend, parent or another relative who helped us learn those disciplines. Why? Because we learn from what is modeled to us. In the following verses, Paul provides three examples for believers to follow that model a life of joy. We will unpack these three examples and then conclude that we are called to live in the joy that is modeled to us so that we might become a model of joy for others.

The Model of Paul: Joy in CHAINS

Philippians 1:12–13

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

Paul’s joy-filled example is inspiring. Even in chains, Paul expresses joy and shares the good news of the gospel. He understands that he has a unique opportunity to share the Gospel with the Imperial Guard. These were the elite military force charged with protecting the Roman Empire. This opportunity didn’t come around a lot! Rather than wasting the opportunity to loathe his situation or desire the pity of others, Paul lived out a joy that transcended his circumstances. He made it clear to every guard in every shift that Jesus was his source of joy and that they could have that joy too.

Paul is being unfairly imprisoned and rather than dwelling on the “unfairness,” he focuses in on Jesus. His example should beg the question in our own lives: What if the trial/persecution and hardship you are going through today (or have been through) is God’s way of using you to share the joy of the Gospel with people you would have never come in contact with otherwise?

The Model of Timothy: Joy in the EVERYDAY

Philippians 2:19–24

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. ²⁰ I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. ²¹ For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³ I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. ²⁴ And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

Over and again throughout Scripture, Timothy is painted as a young, faithful follower of Christ. Timothy was a third generation Christian, born to a Jewish mother and a Greek father (Acts 16:1). He became a vital member of Paul's inner circle and was described as Paul's: Fellow worker (Romans 16:21; 1 Thessalonians 3:2); Brother (2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:2); Bond-servant (Phil 1:1); Beloved and faithful child in the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:17); Son (1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2); and Coequal in the Lord's work (1 Corinthians 16:10; 1 Thessalonians 3:2).

Timothy models a joyfully and faithfully obedient life. Timothy is portrayed as consistent and one who did both the big and little things in a way that honored the Lord. We live in a world where consistent obedience is overshadowed by grand acts of praise. Our world loves the big grand gesture but overlooks daily obedience. Timothy reminds us to be joyful in the everyday rhythm of life.

The Model of Epaphroditus: Joy in TRIALS

Philippians 2:25–30

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. ²⁹ So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, ³⁰ because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

Epaphroditus was a messenger and many scholars indicate that his illness came about as a result of over-exerting himself on his journey from Philippi to Rome or possibly because of his serving Paul in Rome. Hence the phrase "He

almost died for the work of Christ” (v. 30). In this way, he is an incredible model for us!

Sometimes we hear “preachers” say, “Follow the Lord, and you will have good health and financial blessing!” Or maybe something like: “If you have enough faith, the Lord will protect you from harm.” But how do we justify those words against Epaphroditus’ testimony? This man got sick *because* of his laboring for the Lord. Did he lack faith? Was he disobedient and therefore punished? Did he not give a large enough offering? Surely not!

The reality is that we live in a sinful and broken world. Sickness is not a part of God’s original design for creation. Whether sickness or some other kind of trial, Epaphroditus reminds us that following the Lord does not guarantee a trial-LESS life. However, he also shows us that we can have joy even in the trials of life! As James 1:2–3 reads, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

Your Joy in the Gospel Is MOTIVATION for Others to Find Joy in the Gospel!

Philippians 1:14–18a

And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. ¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

Paul argued that regardless of the motives of others, God is sovereign to use whatever might be said to further the gospel. Best we can tell, some people were preaching the gospel for God-honoring reasons. Others were seemingly attempting to overthrow or discredit Paul for their own status or gain. Though Paul has a lot to say about false doctrine and teaching in other places (1 Timothy 6:3–5), this passage indicates that false motives do not hinder the gospel. To be clear, he is not advocating impure motives but simply saying the Lord can use you despite your motives.

Instead, combined with the examples from Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus the central point becomes clear: God can use anyone or any circumstance to display His glory. *Therefore, all situations and circumstances are divine*

appointments for sharing the joy of the gospel! Whether in chains or free, God has us exactly where He wants us to display His joy and be an encouragement for others around you. Paul boldly and courageously shared the gospel in chains. Timothy modeled an everyday kind of faithfulness and obedience. Epaphroditus showed us that joy transcends our trials.

How do we share the joy of the gospel today? How do we see every circumstance as a divine appointment? How do we trust God to use us for gospel advancement? According to the passage, we learn to rest our hope, satisfaction and contentment in something bigger than the present to give us the strength for the present. When our eyes remain fixed on Jesus, we recognize that even in the worst situations: God is still working and desires for us to share His joy. The world longs for the joy we have and the joy we have in Jesus is contagious. We can't allow the enemy to steal our joy and our witness. We must learn to choose joy today!

Discussion Questions:

- What factors can cause people to lose their joy in the church?
- How does Paul's perspective in vv. 12-18 demonstrate the power of true joy in the life of a Christian?
- What might the consequences have been if Paul would have reacted in a different manner?
- Think about the people in your life who best model Jesus. In what ways do they reflect His character? And what impact does that have on people around them?
- How can you find joy in your struggles?
- Why can it be difficult to be joyful in difficult times?
- How do you find joy in the day to day?
- What are things in your daily life that bring you joy?
- Why is it difficult to find joy in trials?
- Who is someone God has placed in your life who needs this joy?
- How can your group encourage you to be joy-filled?

Week 3 (Sept 24–30): Choose Joy in Life or Death! Philippians 1:18b–30

Most scholars agree that Philippians 1:21 is one of the keys to unlocking how and why Paul lives the way he lives:

Philippians 1:21

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

This one verse simplifies Paul's entire mindset. In one sentence, Paul communicates his overall mission as to how he approached life. In this lesson, we will ask a central question: Do we understand our lives the way Paul understands his life? Let's unpack this central verse by looking at the surrounding context.

You Have One Goal in Life or Death: HONOR CHRIST!

Philippians 1:18b–20

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

As stated on numerous occasions already, even in chains, Paul rejoiced! Why? According to this passage it was because he fully expected deliverance. He speaks with joyful anticipation and hope of what is to come, even though his earthly future was uncertain. The word deliverance is probably better translated "salvation." Therefore, the passage indicates that through the prayers of the church and the empowerment of the Spirit, Paul fully expected salvation to come.

The question becomes: Is this in reference to his physical deliverance and salvation from his chains? More likely, given the context of verses 20-21, Paul is anticipating an eschatological salvation. Paul is convinced in a secure, certain and hope-filled future that was not dependent upon his circumstances, but upon the finished work of Jesus. Therefore, he was strengthened to live confident each day, that whether in life or death, his salvation was certain.

Paul's eschatological understanding of what was coming in salvation enabled him to live unashamed of Jesus. How did he have this understanding?

Because of his motto: To live is Christ and to die is gain! Let's unpack these two phrases:

To Die Is GAIN

Philippians 1:22b

Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

In explaining his deliberation, Paul gets real and declares that death is better than life. Death for the Christian ensures no more suffering, no more persecution and that everything will be made new.

Do we understand death this way? We've probably heard the phrase, "Everybody wants to go to Heaven, but nobody wants to go now." Paul makes it clear that what is coming is far better than anything we've experienced in this life. Why do we hold so tightly to the present?

A lot of this has to do with our views of the life to come. Heaven isn't simply a white cloudy place where everyone plays a harp. Go read Revelation 21–22. In the end, believers will spend eternity with their Maker in a new and a new earth! What is the gain of the life to come? It's about being in the presence of the living God by grace alone. Eternity for the Christian will be marked by a total satisfaction of every human longing, to be with God, eternally worshipping the eternal King.

To Live Is CHRIST

Philippians 1:22a, 27a

*If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me...
²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

An appropriate understanding of "to die is gain" should lead us to say, "Well, what then of this life? Why should we wait? Why not leave this world and go to this glorious one?" But Paul makes it clear: To live is Christ. This phrase means to live is to represent and bring honor to Christ, or to live is to live in a way where Christ is made known!

According to these verses, to live in this way is fruitful and good. We have one goal in this life: Imitate Jesus. When Christ transforms us, our actions and labor produces Christ-like fruit. He is the source of the fruit. He cuts off the bad fruit. He prunes the good so they will produce even more. Living as a representative of Christ is to produce the fruit like Christ. They will know you

by your fruit (Matthew 7:15–20). In other words, so long as we have breath in our lungs, we have an opportunity to live for Jesus. The following are three opportunities every believer has in life from the surrounding verses:

Life Is an Opportunity to ENCOURAGE OTHERS

Philippians 1:24–26

But it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Paul recognized that the Lord kept him on this earth to be an encouragement to other believers. What if we embraced our life on earth as a continual opportunity to encourage unbelievers and believers alike with the truths of the gospel? Encouragement can come in a variety of forms and ways. But we must be people who encourage one another: Write a note, send a text, give an extra high five, smile, etc. *To live is Christ* is to encourage people!

Life Is an Opportunity to REPRESENT JESUS

Philippians 1:27b–28

Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.

In every sphere of life, we are called to live in a way that represents Jesus. We must live as though at all times someone is looking at us and asking, “Do they look like Jesus?” Colossians 1:10 says, “Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

To use an illustration for these verses, we are called to live in a plexiglass house. In part, we have to understand that every word and action we do is a representation of the gospel we profess. And at the same time, when the world throws stones at us and attempts to dissuade us away from Jesus, we endure the attack and continue to live as Christ has called us to live.

Life Is an Opportunity to SUFFER FOR JESUS’ SAKE

Philippians 1:29–30

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him,³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

The Philippians are in a similar struggle as Paul. But Paul flips their suffering on its head and proclaims that just as salvation is a gift, so is suffering. God does not call us to His gospel for our comfort but for our conformity to His likeness.

We must never be at home in this world. Living counter-culturally will naturally lead to suffering and sacrifice. But take heart, living for Christ is always better than anything this world has to offer.

Discussion Questions:

- How can you honor Jesus with your life?
- What does it mean to honor Jesus with your death?
- What are two things you look forward to the most about being reunited with Christ?
- How can you live in a manner worthy of the gospel?
- Vs. 21 contains the “secret” to being able to choose joy in every situation. Discuss the practical implications as well as what prevents us from always living out this perspective.
- Do you really view death as a “gain”? Explain.
- What does it mean to live “in a manner worthy of the gospel”? What are the consequences when we fail to do so?
- Paul ends this section by stating that suffering for the sake of Christ is a privilege. (v.29-30) Why are we often guilty of possessing an unbiblical viewpoint of suffering? (See Acts 5:21)
- What can you do today to encourage someone who is suffering because of his or her faith?
- What about your lifestyle do you most want to change in your desire to live for Christ?

Week 4 (Oct 1–7): Choose Joy by Living Humbly! **Philippians 2:1–11**

One of the best ways to define humility is by looking at its opposites: pride, arrogance and selfishness. In his book *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis defined humility with the following example:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

Philippians 2:1–11 explains how Lewis could come to such a definition of humility. To better teach the truths of this passage, we will start with verses 6–11 (begin with Christology) then return to the practical implications of Jesus's example in verses 1–5.

Jesus Came as a HUMBLE SERVANT

Philippians 2:6–8

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross.

Theologically, the passage communicates that Jesus already existed as the form/nature of God prior to His coming (see also John 1, Colossians 1–2, and Hebrews 1). As Jesus said in John's Gospel, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Jesus took on humanity without giving up His divinity. He was equal to God but chose not to exploit His power while on earth. In His coming, Jesus took nothing away from His divinity, but adds humanity onto His divinity.

In this "descension," Jesus did not in any way lose any divine attributes, either temporarily or permanently. At every moment of the incarnation, the Word was exercising His divine attributes to the full (e.g., Colossians 1:17), just like He was before the incarnation. However, His human nature is a genuine human nature and so at least some of the divine attributes are not accessible to the

human nature of Christ. We call this divine humility. This is Christ willfully and humbly submitting to the will of the Father!

The idea of Jesus “emptying himself” is not in reference to losing His deity but is a metaphor for humility. Jesus “poured himself out” by taking on flesh, becoming a servant and being obedient to death, even death on a cross.

The God of the universe BECAME His creation to save His creation. The King of Glory stooped down and took on flesh and served other flesh to the point of a criminal’s death. In our fleshly state, we tend to feel a sense of entitlement. Yet He is the only one entitled to glory, power, praise, honor and kingship and for our sake He set those aside and died for those He loved. Jesus is our model for humility.

Jesus Is the EXALTED KING

Philippians 2:9-11

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus was always God’s plan of redemption, and He alone is worthy of praise. In His divine humility, Jesus defeated sin and death and is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus is the central object of worship! In His death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus completed the work needed for salvation and inaugurated His coming kingdom.

Jesus is the King. We can either acknowledge this now by pledging our allegiance to His rule and His reign or we can reject this now and one day be forced to bend our knee. But whichever the case, Jesus will reign forever. Some will embrace His lordship with anguish and despair, realizing their rebellion as they stand condemned. But many others will embrace His lordship with joy and humility.

Believers Are TRANSFORMED into His Likeness!

Philippians 2:1, 5

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion... In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:1 says that if you know the Jesus in verses 6–11, then live in His likeness and model His humility. Knowing Jesus must precede having relationships like Jesus. People often want to love like Jesus (as a teacher), without the transformation of Jesus. But according to the full context of this passage, Jesus wasn't just an example to follow. Jesus is the Christ, the Lord of lords!

If Jesus wasn't this Christ and Lord, then His example would only serve as a measuring stick among other virtuous people. But because He is Lord, He transforms you into a new creation so that you can actually live out the humility He models. The Christian life is one of complete dependence upon the work of Jesus and the empowering of the Spirit to do what God has called us to do. Humility is not a natural state of the sinful human. But when we share in Christ, we are called to take on His humility.

Christians Should Be Known by Their HUMILITY

Philippians 2:2–4

Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Paul has already identified that the fullness of his joy is in the gospel being lived out in his life and the lives of others. So, to complete Paul's joy is to ultimately see these people do what God has called them to do. Like a pastor urging his congregation, Paul is adding his personal touch to the calling of God in these people's lives.

The command becomes: If you believe in the gospel, then do the work of the gospel in your relationships with others. Live out the gospel joy humbly and model Jesus's humility and love. What is the example of Christ? Do nothing that is selfish or driven by pride. These kinds of actions build up no eternal glory and will make us fall.

Instead, we should consider others better than ourselves. To be clear, humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. Jesus recognizes the value, dignity and potential of every image bearer. We can model Christ when we display the grace we've been given by loving and serving others selflessly. We are called to serve those around us with truth and love (Ephesians 4:15).

Discussion Questions:

- How do you define humility?
- Verses 6–11 contain both significant theological truths as well as practical applications about servant leadership. Take a few minutes to discuss both.
- What is overwhelming about verses 9–11? (Hint: the fact that we know Christ and He knows us!)
- Verses 1–4 sets a high standard for the Christian. Explain both what the expectations are for the Christian as well as the motivations behind the actions.
- How did Jesus model these same traits (2:1–4) in His life?
- How does this passage relate to John 13:1–17?
- How does this passage relate to Matthew 20:28?
- Who is an example of humility in your life? What traits or qualities do you admire about that individual?
- What are obstacles that stand in the way of your pursuing humility?

Week 5 (Oct 8–14): Choose Joy by Choosing Holiness! **Philippians 2:12–18**

Throughout the Bible, the call for God’s people has been the same: “Be holy just as I am holy.” What does it mean to be “holy?” Holy means to be “set-apart” or “to be of a completely different substance,” one who is consecrated and devoted to the Lord. When you follow Jesus, you are called to pursue holiness. This pursuit is not because your good actions save you or because somehow you sustain your salvation. Rather, pursuing holiness is living everyday devoted to the Lord and His ways.

We are called to live in such a way that Jesus is worshipped and glorified as we grow in Him and become more like Him. One of the best definitions of this call to holiness is the call to look more and more like Jesus throughout our life. This is the Christian life. The joy and contentment we have in life directly corresponds to our pursuing holiness and conforming more and more to His image. Let’s look at what Paul has to say about holiness by pulling out the main verse of our passage and then letting Him define holiness in the surrounding verses.

Your Holiness MATTERS!

Philippians 2:15

...So that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.

Sometimes we talk about the Christian life as if it ends with our confession of salvation. But that is just the beginning! When we believe in Jesus, the Lord calls us to a new life in Him. This new life of grace is a life when we are recognized as children of God by becoming blameless and pure. In the midst of “a crooked and depraved generation” (Deuteronomy 32:5) we are called to shine like stars in the sky.

The idea of “becoming” blameless and pure communicates the process of the task at hand, not just the product. Paul indicates that our holiness as Christians is a constant act of BECOMING something different. The Christian life is not about being perfect but about pursuing the example of Christ in our lives. The hope of the Christian life is that through the everyday transformation of the Spirit, we would become more blameless and pure with each opportunity. Why? Like a star in the night sky, our goal is to shine the light of Jesus among all people! The surrounding verses show us how this works.

Holiness Is a WORK OF GOD

Philippians 2:13

For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Our holiness, blamelessness and purity are not accomplished by simply trying harder in our own strength. The only way to pursue true Christian holiness is by growing in our relationship with God and allowing Him to do a work in us! When God's people went rogue in the Old Testament and disconnected their actions from their pursuing a relationship with God, they inevitably "did evil in the sight of the Lord" (e.g., Judges 2:11). The story of Israel proves that without the transformation and working of God, people can't live in the ways of God.

This is the theology behind the preceding verse (Philippians 2:12). The work of God in the life of a believer means that we have every necessary tool to live the life God has called us to live. God has not called us to an impossible task, but a task where we must remain dependent on Him.

Holiness Is a DISCIPLINE

Philippians 2:12

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

First, this passage does not mean that we work for our salvation and tremble for fear of losing it when we mess up. This is the essence of any works-based salvation and is in opposition to the truths of verse 13. Instead, because we have an appropriate fear of the Lord (especially as it relates to the grandeur of verse 9–11), we should naturally live a life of action, not passivity. Salvation prompts a life of working as we follow the example of Christ. Not because this saves us, but because this is what it means to be saved.

This is the purpose of what we call spiritual disciplines or exercises: Bible reading, prayer, fellowship with other believers, fasting, etc. These are all like exercises for the Christian. In salvation, the believer's dry bones (Ezekiel 36–37) gain a flesh that can be worked out and grow stronger. The Bible makes clear that we can approach God's throne confidently and not out of fear (Hebrews 4:16). But fear and trembling in this instance is a call to revere and respect Christ enough to steward our new life well. The happiest people in the world are the ones who are working out their salvation with fear and trembling because they are the ones directly in the will and purposes of the Father.

Holiness Is a CONSTANT PURSUIT

Philippians 2:14, 16

Do everything without grumbling or arguing... as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.

In the context of the surrounding verses, Philippians 2:14 is best understood in conjunction with this idea of working out your salvation with fear and trembling. What good is a worker who is complaining as he is working? Or arguing about it every step of the way? This grumbling kind of attitude negates the work being done.

In all of Israel's wilderness wanderings, though the Lord remained faithful and provided everything they needed, they negated His work by grumbling and complaining (e.g., Exodus 16:2). This kind of complaining is the opposite of a life of joy in the Lord. Furthermore, obedience with complaints and arguing is still a form of disobedience.

Instead, we are called to hold firm to the word of life, which is again related to becoming blameless and pure! Hold firm to this Jesus who is the King of Life. Does this mean that if we let Jesus go, will He let go of us? No! Christ has never and will never let go of His people. Rather, He always inviting us back to take hold of this life He has promised. Holding firm to the word of life means continuing to pursue His ways in both the good and the bad of life.

Holiness Takes SACRIFICE

Philippians 2:17-18

But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Notice the three complimentary words in these verses: "poured out," "sacrifice," "service." All of these are related to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. In a humble way, Paul views their "sacrifice" and support of him as primary to his "drink offering sacrifice." Though scholars have debated the exact meaning of this phrase, one central point is clear: Paul recognizes that pursuing holiness, for them and him, is equivalent to sacrifice.

A sacrificial holiness is the opposite of obeying without complaining or arguing (e.g., Romans 12:1-2). Our obedience and pursuing holiness may take sacrifice, but the result is always rejoicing and gladness. In other words, pursuing holiness, even though it takes a constant dying to self, should result

in joy. When we follow the commands of Christ, Christ our Lord becomes our source of joy.

Discussion Questions:

- What is personal holiness and how is related to the holiness of God?
- The word “your” in v. 12 is plural. How do we “work out” our salvation as the church?
- What is the difference between working out our salvation and working for our salvation?
- What is the difference between *becoming* pure and blameless and sustaining your salvation by your good actions?
- How does grumbling and complaining damage our witness?
- Even in the midst of contemplating sacrificing his life for others, Paul remains joyful (v. 17). How can you maintain a joyful attitude in the face of the problems of life?
- Is pursuing holiness often pitched as a joyful activity? Why or why not?
- What are some practical ways we can live as “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to the Lord” (Romans 12:1–2)?

Week 6 (Oct 15–21): Choose Joy by Knowing Jesus! Philippians 3:1–11

It is always frustrating to fail when trying your best. The result can be a deep sense of defeat and can lead to a variety of depressing emotions. Sometimes the Christian life can be frustrating because in all of our trying, we seem to never get better or we continue to fail and fail over and again. Maybe we pray, “God forgive me, I won’t do that again.” But then we end up in the same place over and again. Why is that?

Philippians 3:1–11 helps us understand not only why this is a pattern in our lives but also how we can move from being defeated by our inability to resting in Christ’s ability by knowing Him. First, why do we fail?

Your Best Is NOT ENOUGH

Philippians 3:1–6

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Paul warns the people that there are folks who are teaching them wrong teaching and a different gospel. They were proclaiming a gospel of required external rites and actions in order to be saved. In the Old Testament, circumcision was a sign and mark that you were a part of the people of God (Gn 17:9–11), namely that Israel would be holy and represent God well. Circumcision was never designed to save the individual, but God’s people have always been saved by faith that God was going to bring about His plan of redemption and salvation for His people (see Romans 4:3). Instead, circumcision was always intended to be a sign of devotion for the people of God.

When Jesus came, He established a new order through a new covenant. He fulfilled all of the Law that came before (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Matthew 5:17–20) and He declared, “Believe in me and you will be saved!” Paul is saying that Jesus changes things. Physical circumcision is no longer a sign of devotion to

God because through Jesus, we gain a “circumcision of the heart” (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4) so that we are able to fully obey and follow the Lord and His ways. This is why Paul says “we are the circumcision” (Philippians 3:3).

But some among them were telling them they needed physical circumcision again. So, what does Paul do? He reminds them that if acts on the flesh could save them then they could have been saved apart from Christ! Furthermore, he reminds them that if anyone could have placed their confidence in the flesh, it was him. Paul was a super-star Israelite. He was the best Jew anyone could have been. But then he declares, “But my best was never good enough to save me.” No matter how hard he tried, he still fell short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Our best efforts and trying will always fall short. If we’re not careful, our dependence on our abilities will leave us to a life of frustration, not joy. What should we do about our inability?

Know Christ’s RIGHTEOUSNESS

Philippians 3:7–9

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

Paul declares that everything he thought was saving him and bringing him closer to the Lord was a loss compared to Jesus. What he thought to be gain was actually a hinderance to the relationship with the Lord that he desired most.

But Paul goes further. Not only was all of his good working a loss, he calls it *skubalon* (refuse, rubbish, trash, garbage, dung!). This is a seemingly harsh word in a world that claims there are “good people” apart from Christ’s work. But even our best is trash compared to the work of King Jesus. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There is nothing we can do to earn forgiveness. There is nothing we can do to be fulfilled and satisfied. There is nothing we can do to clean ourselves up.

But once we recognize this reality, we are called to know Christ’s righteousness. Righteousness is to be seen right before God. The work has been done through Jesus. Gaining Christ is recognizing that we need to gain His righteousness. The only way we do this is by believing that He is the Savior

who wishes to clothe us with His righteousness so that we can have a right relationship with God again!

If we desire to be seen right before the Lord, we have to quit trying to weigh our good works versus your bad works because even our best doesn't measure up. Instead, get to know Christ's righteousness, be found in Him, and let Him change your identity. In Christ our identity is no longer found in what we are able to do or what we bring to the table, but in what Christ has done.

Know Christ's WORK

Philippians 3:10

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...

Knowing Christ's righteousness should not cause complacency but should be our motivation for a present kind of gospel laboring in our daily lives. Our works and obedience can't save us, but a life of obedience is worship. The Christian life is a life that rests in the finished work of Jesus and works itself out in fear and trembling by pursuing holiness (remember the previous session!). Paul is saying by imitating Christ in sufferings and death, He is our model for a life dedicated to the spread of the gospel. When we understand this world is not our home, then we understand that present sufferings in Jesus' name are *skubalon* compared to the surpassing value of knowing Jesus.

Remember, Paul is in prison. Identity in Christ results in imitating and reflecting Christ. In this way our knowledge of Christ takes on a present reality for us. His work causes us to know Him and join Him as a co-laborer. In other words, the more we know Jesus, the more we are able to do what He has called us to do.

Know Christ's RETURN

Philippians 3:11

...And so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul's longing to know Christ was ultimately a longing to be like Christ in His glorified and resurrected state. The "somehow" statement is not that Paul is uncertain of his future hope, but more flabbergasted by it! How is it that, somehow, we might also share in His future glorified state, even though we know our best is like trash?

The glorious part of knowing Christ is we can rest in the assurance that we will be resurrected with Him (see 1 Corinthians 15). Jesus's resurrection is the first-fruits of our resurrection and guarantees the resurrection and renewal of all things in the age to come. And the Scriptures are clear: Those who know Jesus in this life will be resurrected with Jesus in the next one.

The glorious hope of the Christian life is that we will one day come face to face with our God. We must thank the Lord that on that day, we will not face Him in our own abilities and strength because our best will never be good enough in light of His holiness. Rather, we praise God through our Lord Jesus Christ that we will face Him clothed in Jesus's righteousness.

This passage reminds us that we are called to know Christ's work in a past, present and future kind of way: knowing His righteousness (past), co-laboring with Him (present), and the glorious hope we have in Him (future)!

Discussion Questions:

- Be honest with yourself: Does the phrase "your best is not good enough" cause frustration, depression or relief? Why?
- Do you live as though your salvation is dependent upon your actions?
- Why was Paul so against the practice of circumcision for Christians?
- What are some modern day "external rites" Christians add to the gospel? How do these misrepresent the actual gospel?
- Paul treasured Christ more than anything else in his life. What often gets in the way of your passion for knowing and following Jesus?
- How does the importance that Paul placed on his relationship with Christ relate to the joy that he possessed? What can we learn from that?
- Do you struggle to know Christ's power more in a past, present or future kind of way?

Week 7 (Oct 22–28): Choose Joy by Persevering! **Philippians 3:12–4:1**

The Christian life is a purpose-filled life. We do not live aimlessly, as though we are saved and now wandering around trying to be a good person until Jesus comes back. Instead, we are on a pursuit of looking more like Jesus each and every day. Why? Because we know this pursuit will lead to the most fulfilling, satisfying and joy-filled life.

Without this clear vision, Christian perseverance seems arbitrary and pointless. But with a clear vision, that a life in Christ is a purpose-filled life, we should want nothing other than Jesus, no matter what may come our way. This is the essence of Christian perseverance. We must learn to enjoy our salvation by holding tightly to salvation. We choose a life of joy by persevering. In Philippians 3:12–4:1, Paul provides at least five truths about perseverance:

Perseverance Is REQUIRED

Philippians 3:18–19; 4:1

For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.... 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!

Paul says with tears that there are many enemies of Jesus and they are opposed to our becoming like Jesus. Without Christ, they succeed. The enemy will tempt, distract, lie, cheat and do everything in his power to stop our Christian pursuit. But we need to remember that the world can't make good on their offers of life. Their end? Destruction. Their god? Their insatiable appetite. Their glory? Shame. Their focus? Fleeting earthly gain.

This is why every Christian is called to persevere in the Christian life. We must learn to stand firm against these forms of opposition (see the Armor of God in Ephesians 6:10–20).

Perseverance Is DEPENDENT on Jesus

Philippians 3:12, 15–16

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.... ¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of

things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Our ability to stand firm is dependent on God's equipping us to stand firm. Paul says that he has not arrived at or attained his goal. What is the goal? We have to go back to verses 10–12 from last week: To know Christ in a past, present and future kind of way! Paul is driving toward his perfected final state and he knows that won't happen in this life. Therefore, Paul's urging is not for perfection, but perseverance, to press on to take hold of that which Christ has already taken hold of.

Because Jesus has already taken hold of us, we are able and called to take hold of Him. Our ability to persevere is on Jesus first taking hold of us. We are saved and transformed, not into perfection, but into pursuing and being conformed into His likeness. Christian perseverance is like a two-sided coin. One side of the coin declares Christ's taking hold of us in salvation. The other side of the coin declares that because He is holding us, we will persevere in obedience. There's a sense to where the goal has not been fully attained (v. 12), but they are to cling to what has been attained (v. 16). Christ has saved and Christ will save: Be dependent on Him!

Perseverance Is a Work of GRACE

Philippians 3:13–14

Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

We need to remember that for Paul, forgetting what was behind was a tall order considering his persecution of Christians. But his example should also give us hope. God's grace and forgiveness is sufficient to cover whatever is in our past. This forgiveness is not because we don't deserve judgment, or we somehow deserve forgiveness. Rather, we forget it because we look to the power of Christ and His resurrection rather than our own ability.

The enemy wants us to linger in our sin and then on our sin. In other words, he wants us to keep on sinning and then keep on reflecting on the sins committed. But don't minimize the call to find forgiveness and grace in your perseverance. The reality of Romans 6:1–2 remains: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" But we

must learn to hold this in tension with our call to seek forgiveness and grace by pressing on in Christian perseverance.

Perseverance Is a Call to IMITATION

Philippians 3:17

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

Paul says, “Imitate me!” In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says something similar, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.” Like we discussed in session two, we learn from the examples of others. Paul was a man of spiritual discipline. He said to Timothy, “Train yourself in godliness. For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:7–8). These disciplines don’t save the individual but are how we can train like Paul to persevere in our faith.

Spiritual discipline should never lead to legalism and self-reliance. Rather, disciplines like Bible reading, biblical community, and prayer help encourage us and help us stay connected with God so that we are able to stand firm in perseverance.

Perseverance Is a call to Remember Your CITIZENSHIP

Philippians 3:20–21

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Jesus is the object of our faith. He is our hope and we know He is better than any other pursuit in life. By following Jesus, we are granted citizenship into the Kingdom of God, to live under His perfect rule and reign (see also Ephesians 2:19 and 1 Peter 2:11–12). If our purpose as Christians is to cling to what Jesus has already attained for us in salvation and hope for what will come in salvation, then these final verses are a great comfort for us when the world around us goes crazy.

Perseverance naturally assumes friction. But like Hebrews says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the

cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hb 12:1–3).

Discussion Questions:

- How would you define “the goal” that Paul is striving towards?
- Paul was a “one thing” guy (v.13). What would people who know you well say is your “one thing”?
- Verse 16 challenged the church to “live up to what we have already attained”?
 - What did Paul mean?
 - What implication does it have that it was written in the plural?
 - How does it apply to us today?
- How did Paul view those who were “enemies of the cross”? What can we learn from his example?
- What are essentials to persevering as a Christian?
- Who are godly people in your life you want to imitate?
- How should you live, knowing that someone might be wanting to imitate your perseverance?

Week 8 (Oct 29–Nov 4): What Stops You from Choosing Joy? **Philippians 4:2–9**

A lot has been said about joy so far in Philippians, but it's as if Paul begins the grand finale. In the middle of our passage, Paul proclaims:

Philippians 4:4

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

Christians are called to be a joyful kind of people! But here's the truth: When we are happy in sin, we can't be happy in Christ. Though every believer is called to be joyful, sin steals our joy. Paul addresses a few of these "joy-stealing sins" in the following verses.

4 Sins That Stop You from Choosing Joy:

1) A Lack of UNITY

Philippians 4:2–3

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ 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.

God's people should be marked by unity. In fact, Jesus prays for future believers to be unified so that the world would know His love (John 17:20–26). The focus of unity is all over the Bible. Why? Because a divided church promotes a conflicted gospel and misrepresents a united God.

There are two key ideas in this passage: Paul calls the quarrelsome bunch to be unified and he calls the church to help them be unified. We don't know what these ladies were arguing over but we do know these were two believers were distracted from the gospel.

Too often are the arguments of God's people over non-essentials of the faith. But whatever the case was, the church was called to help in the reconciliation process (see also 2 Corinthians 5:11–21). Whether it is personal or between other parties in the church, Christian disunity reflects poorly on Christ. When we are unified, we represent a united Christ. When we are divided, we represent a divided Christ.

2) A Lack of GRACE

Philippians 4:5

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

This verse is closely connected to the previous idea of unity. The word “gentleness” can also mean “graciousness” or “reasonableness.” In other words, God’s people should be marked by grace, gentleness and reasonableness. Harshness, apathy and a contentious spirit stand in opposition to this calling. The root of a lack of grace is selfishness and the result of a lack of grace is anger (see Proverbs 15:1). When things don’t go our way, there is a temptation to show no forgiveness, grace or reasonableness.

But similar to what Paul says in verse 5, listen to what James says, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace” (James 3:17–18). The “gentle” used in Philippians 4 is the same word used in James 3. James’s context helps us understand that “gentleness” is related to peace, compliance, mercy and good fruit.

Furthermore, Jesus modeled this gentleness, grace and reasonableness all throughout his life. This did not mean that Jesus was a weak man. Jesus was far more concerned about modeling a life that glorified the Father than having his own selfish ambitions fulfilled. A gracious life models the grace of Jesus. We are called to be gracious as a response to the grace given to us. We are able to forgive because of the Gospel’s effect now and in the future.

3) WORRY and ANXIETY

Philippians 4:6–7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God’s people should be marked by an outward peace (unity/graciousness) and also an inward peace. Worry is sin because worry is evidence of a lack of trust that God knows what He is doing. In many ways, worry is an attempt to play God when we don’t have the ability to play God (see Matthew 13:22).

Of all the sins in this session, worry is often the most widely-accepted. But there is only one proper response to worry: prayer. In praying through our worries and anxieties, we admit our inability and declare our dependence upon God. We are called to present all our requests to God through prayer and petition and with thanksgiving, praising the God of the universe for

listening and working on our behalf for His glory. In prayer, God promises to grant us His peace.

There are a variety of passages related to Paul's words in here:

Psalm 94:19

When I am filled with cares, your comfort brings me joy.

Matthew 6:25–27, 33

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?... ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

1 Peter 5:6-7

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷ casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you.

4) Worldly THINKING

Philippians 4:8–9

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. ⁹ 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.

Finally, God's people should be marked by spiritual thinking. Paul doesn't just say abstain from the bad, but he says focus on the good. Every good thing comes from God (James 1:17). We need to replace our polluted, worldly thoughts with His thoughts.

This is the essence of Ephesians 5:18–21, “And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit: ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.” Hence Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

But we can't replace these thoughts in our own strength because our flesh can't beat our flesh. We must learn to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (see 2 Corinthians 10:3-5). Furthermore, we must believe that the Lord will always be faithful to provide a "thought replacement" amid temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13).

We can't be joyful in Christ when we are delighting in sin. We must remember that disunity, gracelessness, worry, anxiety and impure thoughts will steal our joy in Christ.

Discussion Questions:

- What would be the impact if the members of a local church lived lives of constant rejoicing (v. 4)?
- Why is it important for Christians to be unified?
- What are some examples of non-essential doctrines that often cause arguments and distract from the unity we are called to promote in the gospel?
- How can you practice strengthening unity with other Christians you know?
- Do you struggle to give grace to others? Why?
- Do you struggle to give yourself grace? Why?
- How is the statement at the end of v. 5 (The Lord is near) connected to the instructions to rejoice and be gentle? What does Paul mean by "The Lord is near?"
- Why does a healthy prayer life help against a world and mind of worry?
- What are ways that you prioritize prayer in your daily life?
- What are the negative impacts of anxiety? (on yourself as well as others around you) How does Paul tell us to deal with anxiety?
- How do you practice focusing your thoughts on God and the things of Him?
- What are some of the things of God you think about?
- Verses 8-9 end with the promise, "And the God of peace will be with you." What are the preceding criteria and how are they connected to experiencing the peace of God?

Week 9 (Nov 5–11): Choose Joy No Matter What! Philippians 4:10–23

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13 is one of the most used and often, abused verses in the Bible. Often, the term “all things” is defined loosely and is applied to everything from sporting events, to dealing with difficult people, to parenting. But as with all good Bible reading, we need to understand the surrounding context to help us understand the full intended meaning of the passage.

Let’s be clear: This is a great verse! But in its context, the verse becomes less of a self-glorifying mantra and more of a humble plea in the face of adversity. In this final Philippians lesson, let’s see this verse in its context and understand how it is one of the greatest keys to unlocking Christian joy in any and every situation.

Joy Is ONLY FOUND in Jesus

Philippians 4:11–13

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

To begin, we need to remember that Paul is in chains as he writes the book of joy. Paul’s letter is littered with optimism that flows from his understanding of God. In these verses, Paul explains that his joyful attitude was the result of his contentment in the Lord. Paul knew what it was like to have a little bit. Paul knew what it was like to have a lot. But he says, the reason he can have joy and contentment in any and every circumstance is because of Jesus!

On one hand, we live in a world that says the more stuff we have, the happier we’ll be. Or slightly different: Be happy by bettering your life, getting more money, bigger house, nicer car, etc. The lie of the world is that happiness is waiting for you to go buy it or achieve it. But this kind of happiness is exhausting and fleeting.

On the other hand, our world will also fight this consumerism thought. The Chinese philosopher Laozi (Lao Tzu) said “Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.” But this kind of contentedness is derived from

self-empowerment and freeing oneself from the worldly pleasures by being content with one's lot in life.

While some folks may struggle with materialism and attempt to find contentment in their stuff, others may look at this word from Laozi and claim it spiritual enough to be biblical. But both are faulty. The secret of being content is not being happy with *what* we have but in *Who* we have! Our joy is Christ. Paul is not looking at his stuff wishing for more to make him happy. Moreover, Paul is not looking to his stuff declaring himself happy with his lot. He is looking to his Savior proclaiming his contentedness is only found in Jesus. What then does it mean that "I can do *all things* through Christ who gives me strength"?

First, the emphasis is not in "I CAN DO ALL THINGS, through Christ who gives ME STRENGTH." This reading places the emphasis on the individual. Instead, it should be read as, "I can do all things THROUGH CHRIST WHO GIVES me strength." Second, our normal rendering of "all things" is better translated like the NIV states, "all *this*." Therefore, what Paul is declaring is that whether in poverty or riches, he is content. How is he able to do *this*? By looking to Jesus!

Every Christian must understand Jesus as the source of their joy and contentment. Circumstances and situations will always change. But the Lord never changes. If we want to "be joyful always" (Philippians 4:4), then we must always depend on Jesus. And who is this Jesus who has been described in the book of Philippians?

- 1:21 – He is THE purpose of life and the gain of death.
- 2:5-8 – He is THE example of humility and the King we follow.
- 2:9-11 – He is THE object of worship, there is no one greater or higher.
- 3:7-11 – He is THE source of righteousness for He has done the work.
- 3:12-14 – He is THE end goal and our prize.
- 4:6-7 – He is THE peace of God.
- 4:13 – Therefore – He is THE source and totality of your contentment.

Therefore:

His Joy Should Be SHARED

Philippians 4:10, 14-18

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it....¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with

me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

Paul makes it clear that he is a beneficiary of the Philippians joy! In many ways this serves as a model for us. Our joy in Jesus should be evident and contagious to others. When we learn to be content in any and every circumstance, we learn to prioritize sharing that joy with others.

His Joy Is SUFFICIENT

Philippians 4:19-20

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

When our joy is in the Lord, we truly lack nothing. These verses are related to the previous section. Paul is admitting that whether he had a little or a lot, he never lacked anything. Furthermore, the gifts of his brothers and sisters in Christ were not given in vain. Just as they supplied his needs, so God will supply their needs.

Amid their own suffering and opposition, God will grant them material need. But this is only part of his promise. Even more, God will fulfill their spiritual needs: steadfastness, perseverance, joy, humility, grace and encouragement. God owns everything and He is willing to supply everything a believer needs for a life in Him. At no point does a believer NOT have access to His joy and contentment! God doesn't leave His people hanging. To be clear, this doesn't mean life isn't hard for the Christian (Paul's in chains!), but rather that every need will be supplied. Every believer can be filled with joy because of Christ's strength in them.

His Joy Is the Mark of HIS PEOPLE

Philippians 4:21-23

Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. ²²All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. ²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul closes with his genuine greetings to all the people in Philippi, to all those he loved and to all those who shared in this joy.

As we close this series, it's important to return to Philippians 4:4: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!* This should be our refrain, our joyous chorus. A joyless Christian is an oxymoron. This doesn't mean we can't be sad, or we can't grieve, or we can't be upset or frustrated. Go read the Psalms! Righteous people have a range of emotions.

But this means that even in the midst of those emotions, our contentment is still in Christ. He is always on the horizon. He is always set before us. He is always in our vision. He is always alongside of us, even in the darkest nights of the soul. Contentment in Christ faces those emotions and circumstances knowing that: CHRIST IS BETTER. And though there is a time for sadness – joy comes in the morning.

May we choose His joy today!

Discussion Questions:

- Do people know Jesus's joy by the way you live in His joy?
- Do people define you as one who is joyful?
- How do you define Christian contentment? How is that different from our society's perspective? What is the source of your contentment?
- Phil 4:13 is one of those verses that our culture loves to quote. Define what the actual meaning is – and how it applies to your life.
- The last section of this letter concludes with Paul thanking the Philippians for their generosity in supporting his ministry. Discuss the connection between joy and stewardship. How do finances often reveal where our treasure is?
- Do you (and your spouse, if applicable) have a disciplined plan for giving, both tithes and offerings? Discuss how you assess which people/entities to support in addition to your church.
- When has God not met all your wants, but all of your needs?
- How does this truth build a confidence in God for you?
- What have you learned from this study through the book of Philippians?