

A Nugget of Joyful Peacefulness

Philippians 4: 2-9

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When Sherry and I were married, one of the best wedding presents which we received was the "Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book." It literally saved us from starving or existing on a diet of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. It contained a wealth of easy to fix recipes that could be prepared with simple ingredients. Both of us were in school at that time and there was no extra money. Sherry would go to the grocery store in the little town of Wake Forest, North Carolina, where we lived and count out the items she put in the grocery basket. She estimated that each item would cost 50 cents. That meant that with our weekly grocery budget of \$10.00 she could purchase 20 items. When was the last time you bought a week's worth of groceries for ten dollars? In any case we survived and although she won't admit it, my wife is a pretty good cook. The "Better Homes and Garden New Cook Book" helped us to not only avoid starvation, but also created an atmosphere of genuine peacefulness. When I came home from working as the youth pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Raleigh and asked, "What's for dinner?" I was frequently introduced to a new recipe that came from that treasured cook book.

Wouldn't it be nice if someone could come up with a cook book for peacefulness? Not the kind that offers suggestions for the next tantalizing dish for dinner, but the kind that helps us to live peacefully with one another. Let's be honest, one of the biggest problems we're facing in America today is getting along with one another, whether we're talking about our families, our work relationships, even chance encounters on the highways. We've all heard the term "road rage" and I'm sure you know what that means, anger aimed at another driver which sometimes escalates into violence. If you are in law enforcement, another term that is frequently mentioned is domestic violence. It can become one of the most dangerous situations imaginable not only for the family that is in an uproar but also for the investigating law officer. He or she must try to step in and bring calm to a potentially dangerous situation. Whether we like it or not, America has become an increasingly violent nation. All you have to do is turn on the TV and listen to the evening news to become aware of what is happening all around us.

I became aware of this problem as a young pastoral care chaplain. I was attempting to help a couple who were obviously at odds with one another. I listened very carefully to their complaints about each other and the fact that their complaints with one another had sometimes turned violent. As the counseling session came to an end, I offered what I thought was good advice as to how they could live more peacefully with one another. Later that day I spoke to one of my fellow chaplains remarking that the couple seemed to be a lot calmer when they

left. "Funny thing," he replied. "I saw a couple just like the one you described inside a telephone booth on the edge of our property arguing with one another. The woman had grabbed the man's long hair and was attempting to yank him out of the booth." "Oh no," I thought. "That was the couple I had just tried to help. Now they're fighting again. Didn't the wife realize that her husband was an ex-Marine. Pulling her husband's hair was probably not a good thing to do." Unfortunately, that kind of behavior takes place all too often. We need some help, a cook book for happy and joyous living at home, on the job, with our friends, and sometimes even in church. Fortunately, help is available and it's found in chapter four of Paul's letter to the Philippians. In fact, it's sort of like a recipe for joyful peacefulness. You take all of its various ingredients, mix them together, add the spice of the Holy Spirit's blessings and you have a dish that will quell the discord of just about any group of people, especially if they claim to be Christians. In fact, that is precisely what Paul was attempting to do. Two people, two ladies in the church, were at odds with one another. They were both good people, people who had worked side by side with Paul and with the other leaders in the church at Philippi. They were dedicated Christians, whose names were written in the book of life. Nevertheless, they were upset with one another and their animosity towards each other was creating an uproar in the life of the church. In response, he made some recommendations that would help them and indeed anyone who wants to lower the level of anguish, anxiety, and all too often anger that seems to take hold of our lives all too often. Let's see what he had to say.

Here's the first thing, verse 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always." In other words, let the world know that you love the Lord and are happy to be a part of His family. You can say it, you can sing it, you can live it as an ongoing expression of your joy in the Lord. With that in mind, let me introduce you to Jonathan Edwards, known as the father of the First Great Spiritual Awakening in the 1700's. Not only was he a respected pastor but also a gifted theologian, a missionary to the Mohawk Indians, a Christian mystic, and a keen observer of nature. He and his wife, Sarah, were the loving parents of 11 children. Those who stopped by their home were amazed. The members of the family spoke and even sang to one another with such joy that it was like listening to a chorus of song birds in an aviary. Jonathan Edward's family had discovered and put into practice what Paul encouraged his fellow Christians to do, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19). When was the last time you were so happy in the Lord that you just had to break out in song? Try it sometime, sort of like singing in the shower, even if you need a bucket to carry the tune. It will be a blessed experience.

Here's another thing you can do, verse 5, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." When our daughter, Joy, was a first grader, we placed her in a Christian elementary school. Her teacher was the gentlest person that I have ever encountered. She never raised her voice. The children, including my rather rambunctious little girl, followed her around like ducklings with a momma goose. Sometimes the best way to bring order and discipline, even to a difficult situation

is to foster a little gentleness. Remember what it says in the book of Proverbs, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

Now pay special attention to verses 6 and 7. I memorized these a long time ago and I dispense them like a doctor prescribing medications. It's one of the best ways to deal with the worry and anxiety that we all face in today's world. At times, everything seems to be going the wrong way and sometimes those wrong ways affect us personally. That's when we start worrying and spend anxious, sleepless nights tossing and turning. Here's what Paul had to say, "Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." In other words, take some time to tell the Lord what's going on in your life and be sure to thank Him for what He's going to do about it. Then rest easy and stop worrying. Why? Listen to verse eight. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Here's the word picture that Paul is talking about. The Lord Jesus Christ will stand guard over your life like a soldier on the wall of a castle, so that worry and doubt cannot gain entrance and bother you. Isn't that marvelous! A truck driver constantly worried that someone would break into his trailer and steal his cargo when he had to sleep during his trips across America. It was bothering him so much that he couldn't get a good night's rest. Fortunately, the truck driver was a Christian and he remembered the verse that I just quoted. He claimed it as his own. One night shortly thereafter he had a dream. The Lord said to him, "Jim stop worrying. I'll look after your cargo until you wake up in the morning."

Now here's the last ingredient in our recipe for joyous peacefulness. Take a look at verse eight. "Finally brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." Isn't that a wonderful verse of Scripture? It's a reminder that we should focus our attention on those things that are uplifting and positive, not on those things that are negative and degrading. Now let me tell you a little secret. When I get down in the dumps and have a negative attitude, here's what my dear wife, Sherry, tells me, "Stop that! Think about something good. Focus on the positive." You might say she gets a little "Pauline" with me.

Here's the final word from Paul, verse 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." Sounds like good advice to me. Or in recipe language—if you want to create a tasty dish of peacefulness, mix in a pint of joyful spirit, add a good portion of gentleness, withhold any hint of worry or anxiety, and be sure to add lots of positive thoughts and attitudes. Once all these ingredients have been blended together you will have a feast of joyful peacefulness that everyone can enjoy!!

