



Unity, Joy, Prayerfulness

Psalm 46; Philippians 4:2-7

As we move into Philippians 4, we find Paul following a pattern found in other epistles such as 1 Thessalonians (5:12-22): finishing with a series of practical instructions which build on the themes earlier in his letter and applying his teaching to the specific situations encountered by his readers.

Earlier in his letter (2:19-30) Paul has written with obvious affection for two of his fellow leaders, Timothy and Epaphroditus. In this section, we again find him naming names but not in a positive way. It seems surprising that he should draw attention to a potentially embarrassing situation when he writes about, Euodia and Syntyche, the two members of the church in Philippi who have apparently fallen out, singling them out in a letter which would have been read aloud to the whole church.

And yet, while Paul does mention Euodia and Syntyche by name, his 'rebuke' of them is relatively understated. No sides are taken, no judgements are made about who is right or wrong, rather there is the simple urging that they be 'of the same mind in the Lord.' This is more than a command to be friends: Paul wants Euodia and Syntyche to work together to display attitudes and behaviours that are fitting expressions of their faith in Christ.

Paul goes on to talk further about the habits which he wants to see developed among Philippian Christians. He urges them to, 'Rejoice in the Lord always,' (v4), reinforcing the importance of this command by immediately repeating it. Paul is not referring here to a temporary state of relief or happiness, but rather a mindset which is firmly rooted 'in the Lord,' in an abiding awareness of what God has done for us. This mindset will show itself to the outside world as 'gentleness' (v5). The word translated as 'gentleness' here (*epiekēēs*) has a strong sense of 'magnanimity' or 'consideration towards others.' Elsewhere, Paul uses the word to describe the 'gentleness of Christ' (2 Cor 10:1).

If there is one overriding theme in these verses it seems to be that of a call to trust in God, a trust which is made possible when we surrender 'every situation' to God in an attitude of prayerfulness. It is also telling that Paul, in verse 6, encourages the Philippians to offer such prayers 'with thanksgiving.' Often, we divide our prayers into different categories. Sometimes we are saying thanks, and on other occasions we are offering our prayers of intercession. Paul, however, envisages an approach to prayer where gratitude is expressed and requests are made at one at the same time.

This short reading concludes with a memorable image that again underlines Paul's emphasis on calm trust. He assures the Philippians, in verse 7, that God will respond to their prayers: 'And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' This is not a peace which comes about through self-discipline or training our minds to think in a certain way, but through trust in God. One commentator notes that the imagery used by Paul would have been especially relevant to those for whom he was writing: 'The notion of guarding would have resonated with the Philippians because the garrison stationed there was charged with guarding the interests of the empire.'¹

¹ Stephen Fowl, *The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary: Philippians*, 2005, 184

For discussion

1. What do you think of Paul's decision to name Euodia and Syntyche in his letter? Is he indiscreet? Or are we sometimes too ready to dismiss disagreements between Christians as private matters which do not impact on the rest of the congregation?
2. Paul does not offer clear guidance on how Euodia and Syntyche are to resolve their disagreement – instead of commenting on who is right or wrong, he simply encourages them 'to be of the same mind in the Lord.' What can we learn from this about our own approach to resolving conflict within the church?
3. Do you agree with the suggestion from Sunday's sermon that our mistrust of others is often rooted in our lack of trust of God?
4. Paul commands the Philippian Christians to, 'Rejoice in the Lord, always.' It's been said that this command does not come 'out of the blue' in Philippians. Earlier in the book, Paul has spoken of his joy that the gospel is being preached, even by people with dubious motives (1:18), and also his rejoicing at his sense of sharing in sacrifice with the Philippian Christians (2:17). He encourages the Philippians to welcome Ephaphroditus with joy (2:29) and also rejoices because of the Philippians' financial generosity (4:10). In what practical ways can we encourage each other to develop this sense of seeing God's hand at work in various situations and responding appropriately?
5. How helpful do you find Paul's image of God's peace being like a 'military garrison' or 'sentry guard,' protecting your heart?
6. Take time to pray together about the things which are worrying you, in light of Paul's advice. You may find Psalm 46 a helpful reading, either at the beginning or end of your prayer time.