

“I rejoice! Do you rejoice?!” As Paul writes the Philippians from prison this uncanny joy is what he returns to time and time again. In a circumstance which ought to cause despair and sadness, he is filled with the joy of the Lord, which tends to Him day and night. But he isn’t satisfied with having it—he wants to share it, and so he asks the church he cares for whether they too have this joy, and this Thanksgiving Sunday Paul asks us the same question.

And of course, we rejoice! Look at all we have. Food abounds on a weekend such as this, family and friends are often close by, and freedom, just as every other day, is our privileged reality! What more than we could ask for, really. So yes we are thankful and we rejoice! Can I get an Amen!?

“So you rejoice! Great!” Paul might respond. “So what now? What does your rejoicing look like?”

If Paul were to ask us this question, we’d stop in our tracks. We’d look at our lives and at Paul’s, and his would stand out... We’d think to ourselves, “Is Paul’s reaction, his joy and his thanksgiving reasonable?” Secretly we ask, “is that how I should be?”

Well, remember that Paul’s joy and thanksgiving stem from a pretty remarkable situation. He had a parallel experience to the 10<sup>th</sup> leper.

They were both outcasts—the leper was an outcast from proper Jewish society because he was ritually unclean, an unclean danger to others; Paul was an outcast from the true faith which he persecuted—an outcast because he was still sinful despite his excellent track record, an outsider among the forgiven, and he was certainly a danger to Christians, threatening their lives.

For both of them an encounter with Christ where they only heard His Words changed their lives entirely; both were made right with God and responded with great joy to God. They were thankful.

This joy and faith from this moment does not fade for Paul—His ecstatic response to God is met time and time again by God’s faithfulness, even amidst Paul’s extreme turmoil. He is confident that he

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can do anything, meaning he can live in all situations because he is Christ's and Christ is his. But he is also certainly joyful for the support that the churches sent to him, but whether he had plenty or nearly nothing, his is an attitude of thankfulness.

But the supportive response of the Philippians is one of Paul's great joys, one of the many reasons he is so thankful. He wasn't overjoyed because they sent him tastier food or warmer clothing, but because they had received him and his message and supported him from the start.

The church which he helped start demonstrated a total willingness to partner with Paul in his ministry, to share with him whatever he needed. They were his first partner, and they were a repeated partner, not a one-time gift sort-of-thing, but instead caring constantly for him and his mission.

They were also an unconditional partner, not more willing to support a successful mission and turned off to him when he was imprisoned. No, they experienced what he felt as he went through highs and lows, wishing to hear from him and to know exactly what he was enduring for the sake of the Gospel, so that they could care for him and pray for him. They gave him whatever they could—finances and even Epaphroditus, one of their beloved members who went to assist him.

We see that both Paul and the Philippians had this inhuman response of gratitude to the Gospel. While their thankfulness was certainly an emotion and an intellectual response that they knew and could articulate, their thankfulness also came through in their actions.

Paul left everything and travelled around numerous times in order to share the Gospel with those who were lost as he once was. And famine, storm, and even imprisonment and martyrdom did not deter him.

The Philippians partnered with Paul numerous times, rejoicing in the message he gave to them and wanted to give back to him whatever he needed in order that others might hear it. Money was not an issue to them, and even when it was, they lived without so that he could continue on.

Both Paul and the Philippians follow in the footsteps of the leper who cried out with thanksgiving at the gift which Christ had given them—their lives were forever changed and they knew and lived out this thankfulness.

This might cause us to feel very guilty—our lives don't necessarily change much because we're believers. We continue working our same jobs (which is great! So did the Philippians). We don't give 100% of our earnings (also okay, even good. Neither did the Philippians—we aren't specifically told to live on pennies). But if there were the need to give a great amount, I know I would be the first to hesitate, I would resist. I wouldn't rejoice in a required "demonstration" of thanksgiving.

Is there something we can do to stir up this gratefulness in order to produce a joyful heart that gives and gives and gives?

Well, first we must recognize this radical response didn't necessarily come instantly after hearing the Gospel—we don't hear about the moments of doubt and wrestling and transformation that may have occurred in between their reception of the Gospel and their willingness to give to Paul, although his response to the voice of God does seem to be pretty immediate, but I don't think this is the regular way things play out.

And their thankful responses that likely developed over time don't necessarily come naturally, because Paul has to still guide their response and encourage it. The Philippians were probably like us—appreciative of the Gospel but not necessarily sure what to do with it, so we need direction.

But no matter what Paul tells them to guide their joyful response, there is no formula to stir up thanksgiving. He can say how they should react, but thankfulness and joy are only brought about by the Gospel.

So Paul tells them—think about the gospel. Think of whatever is true, and honorable, and just, pure, and lovely, commendable, and excellent, or anything worthy of praise. All of these things find their purest form in Christ, who is truth and honor and justice, pure and lovely, truly commendable and

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excellent—He, the Gospel made flesh is worthy of praise. And then everything else that follows in these footsteps is a gift from God, a demonstration of His love for us as a result of the Gospel.

One way we can do this is to remember our baptism, where those traits, the traits of Christ, are freely handed to us and we are conformed into them. And to stir up more thanksgiving we should come frequently to the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharist, our Lord's Supper; here we receive, in both body and soul the remarkable work of Christ which has completed everything on our behalf. And we ought to participate and revel in confession and absolution, where week by week we are received when we ought to be rejected, forgiven when we ought to be condemned, loved when we ought to be despised. And as we marvel at this good news for us, given to us in so many ways, we will see that it is changing everything in our lives, altering every moment of every day. And beyond these gifts which offer us salvation, we see His love and care for us written in all the ways He provides for us minute by minute, from the rest we receive at night to the family we sit with around the dinner table to the food and laughter we get to share—all these blessings God is able to provide for us because He has broken down the barrier between us and Himself by the life and death of His Son.

As we see just how much has been done for us, just how much we truly say “thanks” for, we come to realize that the Gospel doesn't just save us to live life like nothing has changed, because the reality is, everything has. If we don't live like that it's because we haven't recognized the gravity and totality of the Gospel. We have been risen from the dead and we are called to “rise and journey” with Christ; He was on the way to Jerusalem to die and the leper was healed and invited along, and so are we. We are to rise and journey, right where we are. (Luther quote in Franzmann?)

And so daily, we die and we rise, in our place is our new-self, united with Christ, forgiven, healed, perfected, ready to give. And this giving happens naturally. You might not see it, but you do give of your time and energy, even joyfully because you are new in Christ. This happens as you parent and

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act as a friend and work wherever you are employed or volunteer. It happens naturally because it's just what the life of a Christian is.

Other times this thankful giving happens as a choice as we respond to the Gospel—we hear of needs and say “how can I give” and we choose to give. This is what happens when you give to church or a sponsor child or an organization in the community, when you must consciously take upon yourself the choice to make an action.

And you know, even when you give out of guilt, and it's a giving that is sinful because you despise the asker or the fact that you have to give, your giving is sanctified, perfected in Christ. Because you are forgiven, even your most sinfully motivated, merely externally good actions are forgiven and made righteous because you live and breathe and have your being in Christ.

It is this gospel that perfects our giving and our living, and as we return to this source of all joys, we will be transformed, confident to live in Christ in all situations, whether we have much or little.

We will live like Paul exhorts in our text, being reasonable with one another, allowing the other to speak even when we disagree—we can do this because we know that we are both held by Christ, as brothers and sisters working here at Faith and here in Grande Prairie. We can live an un-anxious life because the final reality, the ultimate concern, that of death and salvation, has been solved on our behalf. So we can chat with people who might otherwise scare us, or we can give when it doesn't seem to be the wisest, or we can go through situations that make us uncomfortable, all because we *know* that we live in Christ and because of that we know our end, and we know the God who hears us through our prayers until we get there.

And even when your life is not characterized by this joy stemming from our Lord that Paul hopes for, you can come and go from here in peace knowing that your salvation doesn't rest upon the fact of you feeling this peace and responding in unhindered thanksgiving. Certainly this can be a sign that you might not be comprehending the Gospel today, but that doesn't revoke the Gospel. Whether or not you

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“get it” today, Christ has still died for you and taken away your sins. It is finished, as He has said, and as we return to this, week after week, to be sustained in our weak faith, we are welcomed to rejoice, in the same disease stealing, life-giving work of God—that which He accomplished for the leper and for Paul and for the Philippians, He has done for me and for you. This is a reason to give thanks.

With this in mind, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding and exists in all times and in all places, keep your hearts and minds on Christ Jesus.

Amen.