



Philippians: Official Guide for a Joy-Filled Life! “Focus on what matters”

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Philippians 2:1-13

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Can we close out 2020 already! Pandemic, masks, deaths, economic shutdown, massive changes in work, the church going digital, distancing and disconnection from friends and family, bankrupted restaurants, delayed weddings, baptisms, confirmations and funerals, concerns about injustice and policing, reaction to those concerns both in defense of the police as well as in protesting, riots in the streets, destruction of businesses, countdown to election, concerns about our urban environments, anxiety about the supreme Court vacancy and future court decisions, and general societal angst! Did I leave anything out?

Will we ever get to “normal?” Whatever that is. There is so much anxiety, we need more joy, more unity than ever before.

The Lutheran Church in Romania has a way members greet one another besides the normal “Good Morning” when they meet at church. They say to one another “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” from the famous Luther hymn by the same name. No matter what they went through that week, no matter what challenges they faced, and these are people that spent over almost 50 years of their communist domination, they affirm to each other how great their God is to protect and to support them. God is their defense.

The Philippian church gave the apostle Paul great joy, but there were cracks that needed to be repaired right away. Some members were feeling spiritually superior to others, some were not working together in harmony with their brothers or sisters.

Like all problems, these started small, but they could become big and destructive if not addressed. It’s good to work together to address ministry and society concerns.

The goal according to Paul is always unity, finding solutions together. Talking to one another. But when people yell or walk away in a huff, or smash windows, or talk about burning down the system. . . it’s not helpful and won’t bring the needed change necessary because it is not going to unify anybody.

Paul's advice to the church is to focus on what really matters. And what does Paul say is the most important thing for the church to focus on? What does he say to the church at Philippi and beyond, UNITY – to be ONE.

Paul shares four ways to bring about such unity.

First, he says, be like-minded. He doesn't mean that we should all be thinking the same thing, rather we should be thinking like Christ. Have a Jesus attitude in your life. Jesus' attitude was one of love and mutual respect, and we see it in his inner actions that he has with a diversity of people.

Secondly, have the same love. Again, Jesus' love is sacrificial love that reached out to the world. You and I are comforted by that love of Jesus, and then we want to share it with others.

Third, be in one spirit. You are a part of one body, the Holy Spirit of God is what gathers us in community, whether it's in person or on the internet. The Spirit brings us together to do the work of God and we grow in our love and our service to others.

Fourth, together we are strong. "A mighty fortress is our God." We can work through the differences to truly deal with issues that matter with one purpose and a common goal. And what is that main goal of the church? To share the gospel, the love of Jesus Christ, the good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for the sake of the world and the transformative power it has in your life.

We can stand against persecution, we can stand against injustice in whatever form it takes, we can stand against the false teachers of this age that say that people of faith are stupid, or mean, or weak. We have more that unified us than divides us because we have Christ.

Paul want us to focus on what really matters. One of the problems in Philippians where the people were causing discord because of selfish ambition. They looked down on one another, they marginalized their brothers or sisters, they disregarded the opinions of those who disagreed. They were being conceited and cancelling their brothers and sisters and felt only they were right, only they understood the problem, only they knew the solution. Does that sound familiar to you?!

St. Francis of Assisi said, *"Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is no greed."*

What people need most of all is love, wisdom, patience, and humility. Don't you think our world could use more of those things?

I see a lot of people today seem unable to control their feelings, or their moods or their attitudes. I see it in people following politics, marchers in the streets, knee jerk reaction to

every possible situation. Especially recently with the Covid-19 shutdowns and procedures. Everyone is on edge. People tend to overreact on everything that happens and when you do that you lose focus on what really matters.

Notice that Paul begins chapter 2 in Philippians with the clause “if” – **if** there is any encouragement, **if** any consolation in love, **if** any sharing of the Spirit, **if** there’s any compassion or sympathy, any affection or love.

Paul is saying “of course!” there is these things. God in Christ offers all of these things and therefore you and I have hope, and we can have joy ... **if** we focus on these things.

Joy comes from trusting and believing in God. Even though the world and the stain of sin can dampen our spirits, it is trust and focus on God, that helps you overcome the adversity in this age.

What will the future bring? I don’t know. But focus is your ability to be able to craft your attention and concentration, so that, you can motivate yourself to do what you need to do.

Try to align your focus with your values, or even more important, take on the focus that Jesus has. Think and discern, “what are the things that Jesus cares about?” and align your focus, with Jesus’ focus.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, a congregation that he loved, he begins in the first chapter by saying, “I thank my God every time I remember you.” It’s a personal letter to a congregation that has been so supportive of Paul’s ministry he wants to share with them how important they are to him, and how important they are to the church.

And so he offers them what most scholars believe is a beautiful early Christian hymn about the need for human kindness, the need for compassion and humility, that same kind of compassion and humility that Jesus had for people throughout his ministry. Because after all, what the church is going to do is to guide and model its life after Jesus’ life.

The greatest act of love that the world has ever know is the self-emptying of Jesus by his death and resurrection for you and for me. And as Christians, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to that same kind of love. And so, Paul writes things like, “Make my joy complete, be of the same mind, and have the same love,” the same kind of love by the way that Jesus has for you and for me, and the world.

There is great wisdom in Paul’s words. Words to guide us into a life of joy. Words to help us focus on what really matters. Amen.

In the name of the Father and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.