

Book:	<i>Philippians</i>
Series:	<i>Rejoice in the Lord!</i>
Lesson 13:	<i>“Standing Firm in the Lord”: The Strategy for Spiritual Stability, The Path of Providential Peace</i>
Text:	Philippians 4:1-9
Date:	December 8, 2013

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Next Lesson:	Philippians 4:10-20



TEACHING TIP

We have two final lessons in Philippians—December 15 will cover 4:10-20, and December 22 will consider 4:20-23 and possibly provide a book review.

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: I recently visited a young couple in the hospital. The massive medical facility and the clusters of somber people coming and going was a stark reminder to me that we are broken and that we can’t even keep our own bodies together. I visited with the couple and heard them uneasily tell me about the upcoming medical procedure—some lumps were being removed; the doctors didn’t think they were cancerous, but wouldn’t know for sure until they got in there; and as with any other operation, there were other possible complications. No major problems had been discovered, but the unknown possibilities were real reasons for concern.

Our lives can change in a moment. Physical ailments, employment hardships, financial pressures, interpersonal conflicts, personal temptations, and sudden misfortune are just a few of the faces of brokenness in our lives. And for many people—both Christians and non-Christians—that brokenness can sabotage their stability and persecute their peace.

Paul, of all people, knew the many manifestations of life’s brokenness, and he, of all people, experienced the tumultuous barrage of life against his own enjoyment of spiritual stability and providential peace. So, he, of all people, is uniquely qualified to write to us on this topic.

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

Several biblical passages demonstrate Paul's concern that we be spiritually stable and reveal the various causes and expressions of spiritual instability (Acts 11:23; 14:22; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 16:13; Galatians 5:1; Ephesians 6:10-18; Philippians 1:27; Colossians 2:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; cf. 1 Peter 5:12; 2 Peter 3:16-17). The many biographical sections in his letters reveal a man who knew the blessedness of spiritual stability himself (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, 16-18), and many of his exhortations reveal a man who fervently desired other believers to know the same perfect peace. MacArthur briefly summarizes why this issue was so significant to Paul:

*Spiritual instability leads to disappointment, doubt, discouragement, and ineffective witness. Unstable people are likely to be crushed by their trials. They are also susceptible to temptation.*¹

Already in this book, Paul has addressed this theme of spiritual stability—he modeled a resolute perspective that views challenges as opportunities (1:12-18), he showed us the joy of committing to purpose in the midst of unknowns (1:18-26), and, most recently, he exemplified what it means to “rejoice in the Lord” as an anchor of “surpassing worth” (3:1-11).

In Philippians 4:1, Paul returns to this theme. He writes, “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, *stand firm* thus [or, in this way] in the Lord, my beloved.” The word “stand firm” was used in the same way in 1:27. Its literal meaning of “standing” (Mark 3:31) illustrates its metaphorical meaning of firm, committed conviction (1 Corinthians 16:13). Those who “stand firm” “are not to collapse under persecution and compromise, to fail under testing and complain, or to yield to temptation and sin.”² They remain “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [their] labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The phrase “in the Lord,” used both in the 1 Corinthians passage cited above and in our text (3x—vv. 1, 2, 4; variation in v. 7),

reminds us of the Source of spiritual stability (cf. 3:1). It is within the context of our relationship with Jesus that we can experience stability and peace, even in the moment of brokenness. After all, it is our Master who exemplified and empowers such stability and peace. Hebrews 12:1c-4 says,

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith [cf. Philippians 3:7-21], who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

If we are rightly oriented to the Lord, taking our cues from Him, both in our personal lives as His followers and in our corporate interactions as His body, we can enjoy spiritual stability and providential peace—no matter what kind of brokenness we encounter in life.

Paul is going to color this concept with the beautiful promises of peace in verses 7 and 9.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (v. 7)

And the God of peace will be with you. (v. 9b)

The word “and” that heads both phrases shows that such peace is the result of certain Christian practices, and the phrases “will guard [you]” and “will be with you” link this providential peace to the spiritual stability of verse 1.

So, in this passage, *we are being shown the strategy for spiritual stability and the path of providential peace.* Inspired by God's Spirit, Paul provides for us six spiritual responsibilities that we should be practicing individually and corporately in order to experience the stabilizing peace of God in our lives.

HARMONY (vv. 1-3)

*I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.
Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women,
who have labored side by side with me in the gospel
together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers,
whose names are in the book of life.*

We noted in Lesson 1, our Philippians overview, that the theme of unity within the local church community is a recurring one in this letter. So, we are not surprised that as he comes to a close, Paul again calls us to harmony. The reasons to pursue harmonious relationships have already been considered throughout this book: our joy is grounded (1:4-5; 2:2), our opponents are silenced (1:7, 27-28), our testimony is sharpened (2:14-16), believers are encouraged (2:19-30), and needs are met (4:14-16). Jesus Himself added that our loving harmony is a testimony to His Lordship (John 13:34-35). Indeed, therefore, we must hunger for harmony within our faith family.

In these first three verses, Paul confronts two women³ who were at odds with each other and urges (“entreat”) them to “agree in the Lord.” Literally rendered, he calls them to “think the same thing,” which is exactly what he charged in 2:3—“Complete my joy by *being of the same mind*, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” His general command is now specifically applied to this situation.

This isn’t the only time that Paul commanded people to agree and “get along.” People problems today mirror the people problems faced by the early church, and the familiar poem would have resonated with them, too:

*To live above
With the saints we love;
Oh, that will be glory!
But to live below
With the saints we know;
Now that’s a different story!*

So, Paul had to write in 2 Corinthians 1:10, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” And again, he noted in 1 Peter 3:8, “All of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit.”

Harmony is a vital ingredient of spiritual stability and providential peace. In our passage, Paul echoes much of what he has already written on this topic and describes some features of this spiritually stabilizing harmony.

1. *Affection* (v. 1)

In verse 1, Paul uses similar language to what he affirmed in 1:7-8—“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace...For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”

Before listing out these various exhortations (part of which were directed towards those who weren’t being very loving!), Paul affirms his own love for this church family. He twice calls them “my beloved” (Gk. *adelphos*—“whom I love” and “my beloved”); he expresses his “longing” to be with them (same word as 1:8); he calls them his “joy,” asserting, as before (1:4 ;2:2, 17; 4:10), that they were a source of tremendous satisfaction to him (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20; 3:9); and he calls them his “crown,” referencing the laurel wreath that was awarded to the victors in the Grecian games (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:25).

Thus, before calling for harmonious relationships to be built, Paul’s model naturally paved the way for such unity. Christian affection is an inherent component of Spirit-produced harmony (cf. Galatians 5:13-23).

2. **Agreement (vv. 2, 3b)**

Addressing the two ladies at odds, Paul asks them to “agree in the Lord” (v. 2). As we saw with its usage in 3:1 (and again in 4:4), “in the Lord” brings the topic at hand into the context of one’s relationship with the Lord. Both of these ladies were “in the Lord” personally, for Paul affirms that they had “labored side by side with [him] in the gospel” (cf. 1:27) as “fellow workers” and that their “names are in the book of life” (v. 3b). Paul is telling them that their interaction with one another needs to be enjoyed within that same context—they should relate to one another “in the Lord” (cf. “I appeal to you...by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” 2 Corinthians 1:10). “Agreement between Euodia and Syntyche was essential, and the sphere in which they had to find their harmony was *in the Lord*. Paul knew that if they both got right with the Lord, they would be right with each other.”⁴



Application: If Euodia and Syntyche were in our church family, what would it look like for them to obey this command and “agree in the Lord”? Discuss the practical outworking of that reasoning, and consider what that conversation may have sounded like. *open discussion (consider that the following exhortations in verses 4-9 would have been a good start for them)*

Transition: Before we consider the next aspect of harmony, consider this—the use of the word “entreat” (v. 2) plus this request for someone to help these two women (v. 3) demonstrate that Paul was as concerned with bad doctrine as he was with disunity. Think about it—he actually named these two ladies in this letter!⁵ One writer paints the picture, the humor of which is lessened by the seriousness of what is happening here. He writes,

*If anyone was nodding off in the Philippian assembly while the letter was being read, they were awake now! Certainly Paul was gentle, diplomatic, and respectful, but to be named thus in the letter by the great apostle—all eyes were now upon the two women.*⁶

Why would Paul do that?! Why would he be so brazen as to actually name two individuals who would be both shocked and embarrassed to hear themselves called out?! It is because Paul loved this church the same way he was praying for them to love each other. Remember his prayer request in 1:9—“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more [in] knowledge,” which we labeled “spiritual recognition.” The idea there was that true Christian love doesn’t express itself as we think best, but as God directs best in His Word. Thus, sometimes, true Christian love confronts publicly when societal norms say to converse privately. Oh how we need Christ’s love and oh how we need to know our Bibles in order to love with this kind of spiritual recognition!

God had been cultivating such love within this apostle (cf. 4:1), and therefore he lovingly looks these women in the eye (as it were) and earnestly calls them to put away that which was destroying the peaceful stability of themselves and their church family.

3. **Accountability (v. 3a)**

Paul knew that these ladies might need tangible help and regular accountability in order to obey the difficult command to “agree in the Lord,” when disagreement had become so characteristic of them as to be heard all the way in Rome. So, he asks an unknown⁷ “true companion” (lit. “true yokefellow”) to “help these women.” The word help is a unique word that means “to help by taking part with someone in an activity (lit. ‘take hold of together’): support, aid, help.”⁸ What is suggested is that this helper, this counselor was going to have to get his hands dirty in order to help these women become unensnared.

This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote in Galatians 6:1-2, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens [i.e., yoke], and so fulfill the law of Christ.” He again advocated such hands-on Christian help in 1 Thessalonians 5:14—“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”

“Beloved” (cf. 4:1), we must help one another be unified. We must love in this way—by aiding one another in putting away petty quarrels and selfish ambition and envious rivalry and arrogant dogmatism, and by assisting each other as we seek to “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16; consider reviewing Romans 12:9-21 as a commentary on our own passage).

Application: If we want to know such assuring peace and calm stability, then we must “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called [cf. Philippians 1:27] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Brothers and sisters, evaluate yourself by the standard of Colossians 3:12-17 in which Paul describes a “Jesus wrapped” local church:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.



Remember, Paul here is recommending harmony as an antidote to spiritual instability. So, how do harmonious relationships within a church undergird its stability, even when the brokenness of sin or suffering is affecting it? *open discussion* (MacArthur—“The fellowship and support of the body of Christ is an important factor in developing and maintaining spiritual stability. The general strength of the fellowship becomes the strength of each individual. The more isolated a believer is from other Christians, the more spiritually unstable he or she is likely to be. The church should be a place where people support each other, hold each other accountable, and care for each other.”⁹)

We considered in our overview lesson that Paul provides throughout this book several foes to unity. They are listed below. How might these harmony-stealers undermine spiritual stability and providential peace? *open discussion*

- “Envy and rivalry” (1:15)
- “Selfish ambition” (1:17; 2:3)
- “Conceit” (2:3)
- “Look[ing]...only to [one’s] own interests” (2:4, 21)
- “Grumbling” and “disputing” (2:14)
- “Put[ting] confidence in the flesh” (3:1-3)
- Idolatry, shamefulness, and an “earthly” focus (3:19)

Are you contributing to your own or another believer’s lack of stability and peace by refusing to practice harmony and instead adopting its foes?

Transition: The path of stabilizing peace is paved with Christian harmony. But that is merely one spiritual responsibility that Paul encourages in this passage. If we would “stand firm thus in the Lord,” we need to also practice joy.

JOY (v. 4)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

We have already dealt with this concept in great detail in Lesson 11, for Paul has previously issued the same exhortation in 3:1—“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.” We’ll simply review a few paragraphs from that lesson to remind us what this “gospel joy” is.

What does it mean to “rejoice in the Lord”? Our passage answers this in detail (cf. 3:1; 4:4). Here, we will see that “Paul connects rejoicing to a relationship...The sphere in which their joy exists is in their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ “Rejoicing in the Lord,” then, is what we will call “gospel joy,” for in the accomplishment of the gospel, “the Lord” Jesus provided a way for us to be restored to God, and in the announcement of the gospel, “the Lord” Jesus applied His work to you and me directly through faith and “brought us back to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Thus, the gospel is simply the summary of who “the Lord” is, what “the Lord” has said, and what “the Lord” has done. Truly, then, it is because of the gospel that we have ample cause to chose joy and that such a choice is reasonable and reliable.

So, “rejoicing in the Lord” is the joy that comes from the reality and experience of our relationship with “the Lord” Jesus. As one commentator puts it, “The Lord Himself is both the occasion and source of [our] joy.”¹¹ Another commentator wonderfully builds on that: “...the command Rejoice in the Lord means, ‘Let the Lord be the One who makes you happy,’ ‘Find your joy in Him and in Him alone.’¹²

Paul maintains that this kind of joy—rejoicing “in the Lord”—is “safe,” that is, “by definition a bulwark against all manner of dangers’ (Bockmuehl).¹³ This is what Nehemiah meant when he comforted in Nehemiah 8:10, “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” This kind of joy, then—joy “in the Lord” or “gospel joy”—is vital for Christian stability and success. ...

“Rejoicing in the Lord” is like [a] shields system. It doesn’t keep us from getting attacked, experiencing suffering, or being knocked around in life; but it does protect us from the discouragement, despair, and destruction of those pressures.¹⁴ This “joy (because it is ‘in the Lord’) is independent of adverse circumstances.”¹⁵ [MacArthur adds, “Joy is not a feeling; it is the deep-down confidence that God is in control of everything for the believer’s good and His own glory, and thus all is well no matter what the circumstances.”¹⁶] ...

If our joy is in the gospel—that is, if we are “rejoicing in the Lord”—then, even as Paul (and Timothy and Epaphroditus) has modeled in this epistle, we may (and will) be pressured, but we can keep moving forward with purpose and pleasure (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18).

What we should note from our passage here is that Paul again puts joy into the realm of choice and obedience. Twice, he commands that we “rejoice,” and he uses the present imperative, “calling believers to the continual, habitual practice of rejoicing.”¹⁷ But by putting such joy in the realm of our relationship with “the Lord,” he gives us good reason to make such an obedient choice.

Application: The application here can be quite simple here:

Spiritual stability is directly related to how a person thinks about God. No one has stated that truth more clearly than A. W. Tozer. In his classic book on the attributes of God, The Knowledge of the Holy, Tozer wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”... Knowledge of God is the key to rejoicing. Those who know the great truths about God find it easy to rejoice; those with little knowledge of Him find it difficult to rejoice.¹⁸

If you are not adding to your faith knowledge (2 Peter 1:5), then you will be “unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8) and His fruit is joy (John 15:11; Galatians 5:22).

Transition: The strategy for spiritual stability includes both harmony and joy. Thirdly, it contains humility.


HUMILITY (v. 5)

*Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.
The Lord is at hand.*

The word “reasonable” is frequently translated “gentleness,” (NKJV, NASB, NET, NIV) and means “not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom: yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant”¹⁹ (cf. 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 3:2; James 3:17). It is synonymous with the concept of “carpet-mindedness” that we considered from Philippians 2:3-4. MacArthur explains:

*Perhaps the best corresponding English word is graciousness—the graciousness of humility; the humble graciousness that produces the patience to endure injustice, disgrace, and mistreatment without retaliation, bitterness, or vengeance. It is contentment.*²⁰


God wants this quality to so characterize us that it is “known to everyone.”

 **Application:** Describe what this quality would look like in real life? *open discussion (especially explain what it means to “not insist on every right of letter of law or custom”)*

How would this quality, so evidently characterizing us that everyone knows it, help provide us with stability and peace? A “carpet-minded” humility that doesn’t “insist on every right of letter of law or custom” anticipates that it may be taken advantage of and even allows that to happen; therefore, it is not shaken by mistreatment or betrayal, and it does not succumb to the temptation to be demanding or bitter. It lowers its expectations in a broken planet, and therefore expects to experience brokenness, and when it does, its response of graciousness actually provides healing. James 3:16-17 teaches us that graciousness, the fruit of heavenly wisdom, is “sown in peace by those who make peace.”

What is the link between harmony (our first point above) and humility in 1 Peter 3:8-16, and how does that passage depict stability as a fruit of humble harmony? *open discussion*

The second half of this verse provides the reason or motivation for our graciousness. We can choose this kind of lowness, this gracious humility, because “the Lord is at hand.” This suggests (1) that our Master will hold us accountable to walk in His footsteps, for He was “full of grace” (John 1:14), (2) that Jesus’ presence is near to provide comfort and healing when we are suffering (Matthew 11:28-30), and (3) that there is a Judge who will vindicate us.

 **Application:** Discuss how this knowledge can enable us to practice a sweet humility against the unreasonableness of others. *open discussion*

Transition: A fourth Christian responsibility that will lead to peace and stability is faith.

FAITH (vv. 6-7)

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul’s counsel in this familiar passage parallels his admonition elsewhere to “put off” and “put on.” His call to faith can be summarized in two statements.

1. Turn worries into prayer requests.

Paul literally instructs us to “worry about nothing, but in everything...let your requests be made known to God” (v. 6). “Nothing...everything” demonstrates the simplicity of Paul’s application. *Whenever you find yourself worrying about something, stop!* God doesn’t want you to worry about anything. However, don’t just try to forget about

the situation—that’s impossible. *Instead, start praying about it!* God wants you to pray about everything.²¹ So, “put off” worry and “put on” prayer. Review Matthew 6:25-34 in order to remind yourself that “anxiety is both a violation of Scripture and totally unnecessary.”²²

Illustraton: The robin and the sparrow can teach us a thing or two about worry:

Said the robin to the sparrow:

*“I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.”*

Said the sparrow to the robin:

*“Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father,
Such as cares for you and me.”²³*

But we do have a heavenly Father, and He invites you to be “casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

2. **Add thanksgiving to your requests.**

Not only should prayer be our first priority, but it also should be engaged in with the right attitude, which is why Paul adds that our “prayer and supplication” should be made “with thanksgiving.” Thanksgiving undermines our idolatrous joy-stealers and reorients us to all that is ours “in the Lord.” Therefore, it serves as an effective counterpart to both worry (in our passage) and lust (in Ephesians 5:3-4—“put off” lust and “put on” thanksgiving [cf. 4:22-24]).

People become worried, anxious, and fearful because they do not trust in God’s wisdom, power, or goodness. They fear that God is not wise enough, strong enough, or good enough to prevent disaster. It may be that this sinful doubt is because their knowledge of Him is

faulty, or that sin in their lives has crippled their faith. Thankful prayer brings release from fear and worry, because it affirms God’s sovereign control over every circumstance, and that His purpose is the believer’s good (Rom. 8:28).²⁴

Therefore, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17).

Verse 7 reveals, once again, how important these responsibilities are to our spiritual stability. Referencing faith in particular (v. 6), God promises to bless thankful, prayer-filled faith with “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding [and] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). Like the soldiers who surrounded and protected the city of Philippi, God will station His peace in our inner person (cf. Ephesians 3:14-19). Indeed, “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in You” (Isaiah 26:3).

Illustration: Another young couple in our church family is currently experiencing the brokenness of life. This past Thursday, Ryon and Jessica Reasen began a journey of treating the cancer that Jessica was recently diagnosed with. As their church family has watched them, they have exemplified for us the truth of this passage—that as we bless God (cf. Job 1:21-22; 2:9-10) and turn our worries into prayer requests, He will garrison our soul with peace. The day before Jessica’s first surgery, Ryon emailed me and wrote—

I’m studying through Hebrews and this morning...God [was] teaching me the truth about entering into His “rest” from chapter 3. Part of Israel’s problem that we are to learn from was that they could not enjoy the peace/rest that God had planned for them because they did not have faith/trust God. Instead of enjoying His intended and promised blessing, they had to endure pain, suffering, and ultimately death.

Application: Take the two practical points above—(1) turn worries into prayer requests, and (2) add thanksgiving to your requests—and actively “work out your salvation” (2:12) in your daily faith this week. God’s promised and surpassing peace will become your stability.

Transition: Following harmony, joy, humility, and faith, Paul provides us with another milemarker on the path to stabilizing peace. The fifth spiritual duty that we should practice in order to “stand firm in the Lord” is meditation.

MEDITATION (v. 8)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

We will use the word “meditation” for this point, not because we’re advocating some kind of ethereal mysticism of the New Age movement, but because the phrase “think about” literally means “to give careful thought to a matter: think (about), consider, ponder, let one’s mind dwell on.”²⁵ Clearly, then, Paul wants us to think!

But Paul wants us to do more than just think; he wants us to think well. In his book entitled, *Think: The Life of The Mind and The Love of God*, John Piper suggests, “As few things are as easy as thinking, so few things are harder than thinking well.”²⁶ But that is what we must do!

What we think about is tremendously important! Proverbs 23:7 declares, “For as he thinks within himself, so he is.” Jesus confirmed that maxim in Mark 7:20-23—“What comes out of a person defiles him. For from within, out of the human heart, come evil ideas, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, evil, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, and folly. All these evils come from within and defile a person.”

Clearly, then, we must think well! Proverbs 4:23 admonishes, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Paul also challenges us to spare no energy in this matter of thinking well—“We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

So, what does this kind of meditation (i.e., thinking well) look like? What is its content? Where is its focus? Well, in verse 8 Paul describes it by listing eight virtues that are to characterize our meditation. These virtues simply reflect the character of Christ as revealed in Scripture. Using this list, we are to evaluate²⁷ all of our thought processes, decisions, goals, etc., thus fulfilling Paul’s prayer in 1:9-11 that we “approve what is excellent.” This is what it means to think well!

So, no longer can we allow feelings or pragmatism to determine what we decide and do. No, we must meditate on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise.”

- **True** — “pertaining to being in accordance with fact: true”²⁸
- **Honorable** — “worthy of respect/honor: noble, dignified, serious”²⁹
- **Just** — “just, upright, [righteous,] i.e., being in accordance with God’s compelling standards”³⁰
- **Pure** — “pertaining to being without moral defect or blemish and hence pure”³¹
- **Lovely** — “pert. to causing pleasure or delight, pleasing, agreeable, lovely, amiable”³²
- **Commendable** — “pertaining to deserving approval or good reputation—‘worthy of praise, worthy of approval’”³³
- **Excellent** — “virtue, goodness, excellence”³⁴

- **Worthy of praise** — “applause, commendation, praise, approbation”³⁵



Application: Discuss how having our thoughts controlled by those virtues would provide us with peaceful stability?

open discussion

Which one(s) of those virtues tends to be lacking from your thinking and needs to be actively meditated upon in order to ground your stability and peace?

Transition: Philippians 4:1-9 provides us with *the strategy for spiritual stability and the path of providential peace. Six spiritual responsibilities are being offered to us so that we might experience the stabilizing peace of God in our lives, and we’ve already considered five of them—harmony, joy, humility, faith, and meditation. The final responsibility ties them all together and is found in verse 9—obedience.*

OBEDIENCE (v. 9)

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul again references his example, not because he saw himself as worthy, but because he had diligently sought to model Christ. So, he in essence says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The overflow of his life—all that the Philippians had “learned and received and heard and seen in [him]”—was the byproduct of a Spirit-controlled individual. Paul himself had epitomized these spiritual responsibilities, as he had both taught (“learned and received”) and modeled (“heard³⁶ and seen”) them. Therefore, he wrote in Philippians 3:17, “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”

Following Paul’s example means that we simply “practice” the spiritual responsibilities that he modeled. The word “practice”

means “to bring about or accomplish something through activity.”³⁷ It refers to “particular deeds, acts, or works done repeatedly or continually.”³⁸ Thus, it stresses a level of discipline that is absolutely necessary in order for a believer to know spiritual stability. “When all is said and done, spiritual stability comes down to living a disciplined life of obedience to God’s standards”³⁹ (cf. Acts 2:42; Ephesians 4:11-16).

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

*I defy you to read the life of any saint that has ever adorned the life of the Church without seeing at once that the greatest characteristic in the life of that saint was discipline and order. Invariably it is the universal characteristic of all the outstanding men and women of God. Read about Henry Martyn, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, the brothers Wesley, and Whitfield—read their journals. It does not matter what branch of the Church they belonged to, they have all disciplined their lives and have insisted upon the need for this; and obviously it is something that is thoroughly scriptural and absolutely essential.*⁴⁰

Application: Brothers and sisters, we must discipline ourselves to obey the spiritual responsibilities regarding our attitudes, thoughts, and actions described in this passage. When we do that, we have the assurance of stability, for “the God of peace will be with you” (v. 9).

CONCLUSION

Brothers and sisters, in a world of brokenness, God provides peace and offers stability to His people. Those blessings are discovered along the path of spiritual responsibility. As we practice harmony, joy, humility, faith, meditation, and obedience, God promises that we can “stand firm [in this way] in the Lord.”

As we close, let us pray the prayer of the song-writer.

*Still, my soul, be still,
And do not fear
Though winds of change may rage tomorrow.
God is at your side;
No longer dread
The fires of unexpected sorrow.*

*God, You are my God,
And I will trust in You and not be shaken.
Lord of peace, renew
A steadfast spirit within me
To rest in You alone.*

ENDNOTES

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 267.

² *Ibid.*, 268.

³ “Little is known about Euodia and Syntyche, but several facts about the situation are evident. First, they were church members, not troublemakers from outside the congregation. Second, their dispute was evidently not over a doctrinal issue. If it had been, Paul would have resolved it by siding with the one who was correct and rebuking the one who was in error. Third, they were prominent women, well respected by the Philippian congregation. They may even have heard Paul preach on the banks of the Gangites River when he first came to Philippi (Acts 16:13). Already the dispute between these women was causing significant dissension in the Philippian fellowship” (*Ibid.*, 271).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Michael Bentley puts this inscripturated account into some perspective: “If in one hundred years’ time, your name was to be discovered mentioned in an old document, what one thing would you like the finder to learn about you? Would you like it to be recorded that you were a very kind and loving person, or that you were a mature Christian, or that you were good at making people feel at ease? Two ladies from the church at Philippi have gone down in history, and the thing they are remembered for is that they had fallen out with each other” (*Shining in the Darkness*, p. 145, in Roger Ellsworth, *Opening up Philippians*, Opening Up Commentary [Leominster: Day One Publications, 2004], 81).

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 164.

⁷ Of the identity of this “true companion,” MacArthur writes (MacArthur, 272),

“Several possible explanations for the identity of this individual have been offered. Some believe he was an individual Paul knew, but chose not to name. But since in the immediate context Paul named Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement, why would he not have named this individual? The Philippians surely knew who he was, whether or not Paul named him. Others argue that Paul used the singular term suzugos in a collective sense to refer to the Philippian church as a whole.

The best explanation is to leave suzugos untranslated and take it as a proper name. That Paul calls him true or genuine Suzugos is a play on words, indicating that Suzugos was a genuine yokefellow and thus lived up to his name. Paul made a similar play on words in Philemon 10–11, “I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful [Onesimus means “useful”] both to you and to me.” Similarly Barnabas lived up to his name, which means “Son of Encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Suzugos was a genuine yokefellow, just as Onesimus was genuinely useful and Barnabas was a true son of encouragement.

Suzugos was probably one of the overseers (elders) mentioned in 1:1. The elders obviously had not resolved the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche, since it was still going on. So Paul reminded Suzugos of his duty by writing, I ask you also to help these women.

⁸ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 955.

⁹ MacArthur, 269–270.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹¹ Hughes, 122.

¹² J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 147.

¹³ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 181, quoted in Hughes, 122.

¹⁴ Kent Hughes and Matthew Henry demonstrate what this kind of spiritual protection, provided by “rejoicing in the Lord,” looks like (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 2 (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 1096, in Hughes, 122):

There is safety for all believers in the joy of the Lord. Matthew Henry, the Puritan expositor, wrote, “The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.” The joy of the Lord is a divine armament. Those living in his joy are resistant to attacks that take others down. Resiliency marks their steps. The taste of joy renders the tempter’s offerings bland by comparison.

¹⁵ Hughes, 122.

¹⁶ MacArthur, 273.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 274.

¹⁹ Arndt, 371.

²⁰ MacArthur, 276.

²¹ “The three synonyms used here, **prayer**, **supplication**, and **requests**, all refer to specific, direct offerings of petition to God” (Ibid., 283).

²² Ibid., 279.

²³ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), p. 164, quoted in Hughes, 169.

²⁴ MacArthur, 283.

²⁵ Arndt, 598.

²⁶ For a more thorough treatment of the importance of thinking in the life of a Christian, see MacArthur, 285-289.

²⁷ Our word “think” meant “to determine by mathematical process: reckon, calculate” (Arndt, 597) in 3:13.

²⁸ Arndt, 43.

²⁹ Ibid., 919.

³⁰ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

³¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 745.

³² Arndt, 886.

³³ Louw, 429.

³⁴ Swanson.

³⁵ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

³⁶ “Here Paul alluded to what the Philippians had heard about him from other people. His reputation was impeccable, and they had certainly heard from others about Paul’s character, lifestyle, and preaching. They were also to imitate the godly virtue that the apostle had become known for” (MacArthur, 292).

³⁷ Arndt, 860.

³⁸ Zodhiates.

³⁹ MacArthur, 291.

⁴⁰ *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), quoted in MacArthur, 292-293.