

Series: "Valuable Wisdom for a Church 'on the Move'"

Sermon: "Control"

Text: Philippians 4:4-9

RGGJR/FBCCS/11-15-20 **UNEDITED**

- I have been blessed to have many important people in my life that are believers in Jesus as Savior and many of these also, rightly, trust him to be the Lord of their born again lives. (Lot's of theology there!)
- Two of the people that are especially important to me I met early on after we joined the partnership with you of ministry in FBC, 18 years ago this Sunday. Time flies when you are having fun!
- One of these very important Christian people who has ministered to me for 18 years is my barber. She has kept me looking handsome for all these years.
- The other is my dentist. I've had a dentist who was believer before but he was a grouch. This sister, who is my dentist, has always had the attitude of Christ—always. There is much I could tell you about her but suffice it to say, when she finally opened her own solo practice just before Covid 19 hit, she of course named it, "**Grace Dental.**" BTW: The gentleness and patience of my dentist is contagious and so it is reflected in all of her staff. She sets the tone. It is quite and office full of nice people.
- Both my haircuts and dental appointments sometimes take a little longer than normal because we talk about "God things." My dentist knows about you and what we have gone through collectively as a church through the years. I have prayed for her and her family and I believe she has prayed for my family and for you. When she sees me in Sam's Club, even when I have not seen her, she stops me and asks, how are you guys and how is the church?
- I trust my dentist as a sister who loves the Lord. So, when I broke a second tooth during Covid 19, a crown this time, I had to listen to what she lovingly said. "*Raleigh, you are grinding your teeth. You have never done that before but that is why you are having issues*

*like this. Lots of people I am seeing right now have **anxiety** that is causing them to do just what you are doing."*

- Anxiety? I'm not an anxious person. How could I be??!! I am studying **Philippians** and I am going to have to preach **Philippians 4** where, in one verse the Apostle Paul writes, "**Do not be anxious about anything.**"
- I'm not an anxious person, generally speaking--at least I never thought I was an anxious person. But, now, my grace-filled, sister-dentist was suggesting that I had enough anxiety that I was destroying my teeth.
- Was it Covid? Was it selling our facility? Was it trying to make sure we all have the same-minded biblical values as a church? Did the Apostle Paul have any teeth left in his mouth after so many harrowing experiences on God's mission and contact with so many immature churches?
- Was it trying to get us to see clearly the opportunities we have as a church? Was it trying to help four parents at a long distance? Was it brain tumors and heart valves? Was it discouraging, broken relationships in FBC? Was it all of these or none of these that was cracking my crowned and filled molars?
- I don't know how you react to finding out things like this from someone you trust has your best interest in mind. But, when my doctor tells me my blood pressure is creeping up a bit and some part of the cure is to "reduce stress," I am stressed over trying to reduce my stress.
- When Paul tells me in **Philippians**, "**don't be anxious,**" my immediate response is to become anxious over trying not to be anxious.
- Could there be a clue to something common in my responses? Yes there could be. Could I be believing an un-truth in cases like these?

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- I'll give you a hint from the beginning. A long, long time ago, God built the perfect place for human beings to have real LIFE and to grow into their mission as his image bearers in Creation.
- Some time into that process, humans decided they could have significance apart from God and his design for them. They decided they could provide for their own lives. They took **control** from God and vested **control** in themselves. It was a lie—an un-truth—they believed that has resulted in many broken many down through human history.
- I spent quite a bit of last Sunday's time expressly validating for you that the text we will consider today is not part of a final, disconnected list of *miscellaneous* ideas Paul couldn't fit in elsewhere in the letter. Rather, he is still dealing with something very important in connection with the mission the church is on.
- "**Standing firm**," as a church on the mission of God, and thus not inadvertently becoming "enemies" of the Gospel instead of its "Ambassadors," would require an attitude like that of Jesus Christ. Who, even being God, was willing to lovingly humble himself and sacrifice for the true, redemptive good of others.
- Paul believed that he had modeled this humility for the Philippians and partners on the mission such as Timothy and Epaphroditus, had as well.
- Although Paul doesn't mention the Corinthian believers who made up a church in another wealthier, more cosmopolitan city by name, he seems to have in mind their potential failure as a church on God's redemptive mission. They will not accept that loving, sacrificial humility is the way to success on the mission.
- They will fight Paul and each other to win a battle for personal significance, power and certainly control. They look more like many

of our modern politicians than like Jesus Christ whose image they are to be in the dark world.

- The Philippian church, poorer in terms of wealth, probably less educated and sophisticated by the metrics of the world, is a "good" church on God's mission. However, Paul moves through the letter from good examples of humility that will make the mission a success by God's metrics to a potential point of failure that could damage the mission as much as the Corinthians' struggle to "win" their battle for significance, power and control in the church.
- Two, well known, likely leading women in the church are disagreeing with each other in a way that will hurt the mission. I have suggested to you that, unlike most commentators, teacher and preachers, I want us to see all of **Philippians** chapter 4 as at least connected to what may seem like a personal struggle between two women.
- With this in mind, I will begin reading all the way back in 3:17 where Paul begins a renewed frame of "example-following" that doesn't end at the chapter change but goes until concludes with the other bracket of example following in 4:9.
- **READ Philippians 3:17-4:9**
- A Christian whose mind is on earthly things and living for earthly appetites such as personal significance, power and control becomes an enemy of the Gospel mission rather than an ambassador.
- So, that, if the church wants to stand firm on God's mission as Gospel ambassadors rather than enemies, they will need to follow the humble, sacrificial example of Jesus, Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus.
- So that, if this is the case, the example of Euodia and Syntyche is wrong. They are not exhibiting sacrificial humility but rather fighting to win something that matters by a worldly metric but not by God's.

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- So that, and here begins the text for today, so that the church of Philippi can be different—like a star shining in the dark night sky.
- First, they can be a church that is always "**rejoicing**" on the tough mission rather than fighting with each other to win worldly successes as the Corinthians always were doing.
- Verse 4 of chapter 4 "**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**" is often snatched out of the context and used as general slogan telling us to be "joyful" as individual believers.
- But in the context I see, this is not a miscellaneous, general command to put on Christian coffee cups and sell at the Dollar Store (I bought some cups like this there for COMCOR Christmas last year).
- The rejoicing here is a rejoicing that will take place even when working through this personal disagreement because it can be worked through—because there is power from God to work it through—because there is motivation that the mission is more important to help them work it through.
- The sacrificial humility here, and in all disagreements between believers, will shine out by an obvious **gentleness** in how those who disagree treat each other. If you consider the word here for "gentleness," it is used in ways that speak of gracious forbearance—a gracious, patient putting-up-with versus anger and quarrelsome speech.
- BTW: In the next few months, we may be selling our accustomed facility and realigning our ways of being on mission together and doing it during a time when people are breaking lots of teeth. Will we be able to rejoice always in this process? Will we be able to disagree with gentleness rather than with an angry desire to win? It will take humble sacrifice like Jesus.

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- Many years ago, very early in my time as a *partner* with you in FBC, we were going through a transition in thinking about the values and mission of the church. We were doing it in much easier circumstances. In a Body Life meeting in this very room, one person got up and shouted accusations at some others. I would say they did it in an angry quarrelsome way. Did they "win" as they hoped they might—the metric being "my way is the only right way to do things?" Not at all. That single display, that was not one of "*letting gentleness be evident to all,*" caused division and misunderstanding.
- To this day, when, mostly at funerals, I meet the person who did this, they seem unaware of the destruction it brought to the mission. However, others listened to the angry words, magnified them, construed their meaning, as they would choose, never clarified the truth and to this day are still angry and divided from the people of FBC. They have lived for nearly two decades with anger over one lack of gentleness in a church.
- This is important for all of us to consider as we look at the wonderful opportunities we have in front of us as a church.
- At this point, Paul adds the clear, powerful statement "***the Lord is near.***" Is he saying a negative be careful Jesus is watching you? Is he setting up what he will say next—a positive--don't worry because Jesus is here to help?
- I suspect it ends up doing both the negative and the positive depending on your attitude when you hear it. If you are Euodia and Syntyche, I suspect you are reminded that your squabble is not some private matter that has nothing to do with the church and its mission. No, in fact, Jesus is standing right here watching you fight to win. You are involving him in this.

- If you are Clement or the "loyal yokefellow" you hear Paul assuring you that as difficult as any issues in the church can be—now especially a destructive, relational issue—Jesus is there working. You are not on your own to fix this. In fact, you are not in **CONTROL** over the church or the problem. He is!
- Now we get to what is sometimes used as a "slogan." "**Do not be anxious about anything.**" Certainly, it applies to more than being anxious about fixing a fight between to women in a church in Philippi. So, you can still use it as a general truth. However, just as certainly, it is raised as a truth because this church fight, like all church fights, can seem impossible to fix.
- The result of my recent dental work and my resultant deeper thinking about what it means "not to be anxious about anything" is this: **Anxiety is ultimately a result of me believing the un-truth that I must be in control.** I must hold on to the control to maintain things or fix things that I deem need fixing. If I don't have control, I must "win" control. It usually seems that I am winning control from some other human being. I rarely think deeply enough in the moment to recognize I am ultimately grabbing control from God.
- Now, here is the important reason I have emphasized keeping this in the context of an argument in the church of Philippi. I am anxious because I think I must be in control to fix things. Of all the brokenness of this world, relational brokenness is one of the most difficult to fix. Paul wants the "fixers" in Philippi to recognize they are not in control of fixing people.
- Did you hear that correctly? Did he really say that? **We are not in control of fixing other people.** For most human if, fixing others is not their vocation—their job—then at least it is their most important hobby—the one they enjoy most often.

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- Then how will relational struggles be fixed? You are making me "anxious" Raleigh. I'm about to break a tooth. What did he just say? **"The Lord is near!"**
- So what does that mean? Be gentle and look at what is next—PRAY! Jesus does fix people! In fact, it is his mission and he humbly sacrificed himself to accomplish it.
- In everything, here especially including people problems in a church, in everything **pray**. Talk to God. Jesus is right there to hear. Make **petitions**. Ask God to work in the situation—that is ask God to fix it **his way** because you cannot because you can't really control things.
- As you pray and ask, do it with **gratitude** (thanksgiving) to God because he is the one who you are trusting to be in control and "fix" things his way.
- This is where the peace that transcends our ability to reason to explain why we have it when stuff is still not yet fixed comes from.
- This is how to experience peace when an issue is ongoing rather than anxiety because we can't fix it and we aren't feeling in control. This is how to have God's peace even in relational messes knowing no human really controls another human in order to fix them.
- Can this apply to areas other than relationships? Sure! I think it can apply to any area of life over which I try to keep or gain control rather than living in the truth that I am not in control but God is and he is NEAR!
- This is what makes a church stand when there are struggles. This is what guards our hearts and our thinking individually and collectively when there are problems and even relational struggles. What? Knowing the truth that I am not in control to fix this. God is. He is right here with us in this and we can talk to him about it and even make requests to him about it.

- **BUT HE IS IN CONTROL. JESUS IS IN CONTROL OF FBC.** Not you. Not me. Sometimes we may forget that and fight each other to win control when that isn't really a possibility for our mission.
- With our minds and hearts running on truth rather than untruth and any anxiety replaced by peace, how do we stay peaceful and not become anxious again as we wait for God to exercise his control and fix things he desires to fix in the way that aligns with his plan?
- We pay attention to the next piece of wisdom in this section in verse 8. Rather than allow our minds to validate our fleshly need for significance by winning—rather than thinking thoughts that justifying our need to control, we very pro-actively think differently.
- We think true things—reality according to God. WE think respectable thoughts—honorable rather than destructive thoughts—righteous thoughts—morally pure thoughts—lovely or maybe better God-pleasing thoughts—admirable thoughts that deserve approval from God—excellent thoughts that are worthy of God's praise—we ***"think about such things."***
- If you forgot that even this wisdom comes in the context of two women fighting in the church please recall that now. Because what Paul is emphasizing here is that, we ***think the best of each other instead of the worst.***
- In human battles for power in relationships what is one of the most flammable and explosive fuels to keep a fight going and to blow it up so it spreads to others? Assuming the worst of someone else instead of the best. Assigning negative motives to all they do instead of believing they might have some good in them.
- If you need an example of the destruction this can bring to human relationships and communities, you need to look no further than our current political and governmental environment. Do you want to

"win" from or over someone else—maybe even for what seems to be a good reason?

- Then supercharge your effort to win the fight by thinking the absolute worst of them at all times and in all ways. You will then be able to justify any means for your victory even if it is hypocritical and sinful.
- If the folks in Philippi wanted to continue to stand on God's redemptive mission, they would need to resolve the Euodia and Syntyche relational issue. How could they fix it? Well, in truth, they couldn't. Could they do anything? Sure!
- They could have the same attitude as Jesus—humble, sacrificial love putting others true needs first. They could then deal with each other in gentle ways rather than like gladiators in a fight to the death over power and control.
- They could pray with peaceful assurance rather than anxiety over the matter because the reality was God is near—Jesus is near and he is in control and can fix things his way and in his time.
- Then, with this rejoicing peace in their hearts, they could stand together by the power of BIBLICAL positive thinking that was true and beautiful instead of thinking the worst of each other.
- In verse 9, Paul finishes his framing by saying once again, you have watched me do this, by the power of Jesus. Now you do it. And, do it with rejoicing peace because you will not have to worry about being in control and fixing it. God is near and he is in control.
- Clearly, it is easy to see how this context was expanded to include other areas of life than relationships in churches between to disagreeing women leaders. As I've already said, I think that expanded application is fair.

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- We lose peace and rejoicing in any area of life when we live as if we are in control and we need to fix things. That principle will work in every circumstance.
- But, let's not leave out the close circumstance of the context. We will certainly lose joy and peace when we live as if we are meant to be in control of fixing other people. This is attempt at taking control like we are God will be a real teeth-breaker!
- Two comments in closing. First, the relationships may not only be church relationships. Right now, we personally are learning, as many of you have or are, and we are trying to be examples of the truth, that Mary and I are not in control and tasked with fixing life for four older parents.
- Maybe you are learning you are not in control of fixing life for your kids.
- Maybe it's the people at work. Maybe it is other Christians who choose a different lifestyle than you would. Maybe it is those who don't drive correctly or maybe those who wear masks incorrectly, as if they were meant to be "chin diapers."
- We lose God's joy and peace and replace it with anxiety every time we decide we are in control and thus responsible to fix people. I'll let you think about that.
- Then finally, some of you may have concluded this means we live a passive life and there can certainly be no such thing as a leader. Not so! Absolutely not so!
- Jesus' humble example was not passive! It was just not active in the way the world measures active that includes always being in control over others.
- The most non-passive life I can envision is a life actively seeking to follow the examples Paul calls on the Philippians to follow here!