

PHILIPPIANS

Rejoicing In Christ (4:2-9)

Commentary: Week Seven

North American Commentary¹

(2) Exhortation to Unity [4:2-3](#)

[4:2-3](#) At this point Paul addressed the problem of unity. It is the first specific problem known about the church, but Paul may have been concerned with it from the beginning of the epistle. The location of this discussion in the epistle suggests two different characteristics of the problem. On one hand, its occurrence in a prominent place in this section of the epistle suggests that the problem had some significance. It was more than a passing disagreement. It had the potential of splitting the church into two groups. On the other hand, it occurs near the end of the epistle and is handled in a relatively soft manner. Apparently it was not enough of a problem to cause Paul undue alarm. Paul had faith in the women themselves and the church's ability to correct the problem.

Nothing is known about these women or the dispute between them. Many scholars have attempted to identify them, but the conclusions are all conjecture, and the best course of action is to stay within the bounds of Scripture. Some suggestions may be drawn from the knowledge of Acts and Philippi. Women occupied a prominent place in the church. They were among the first converts. The controversy occurred between two notable women who played a major part in church life. Whatever the cause, several factors emerge about the problem: It was significant enough that the women could not solve it themselves; it probably was not a doctrinal problem since Paul spoke to such matters when they arose; it was divisive enough to cause the church to write to Paul about it; the entire church was asked to intercede on behalf of these women; and the fellowship and ministry of the church faced a major crisis because of it.

In writing how to solve the problem, Paul identified a process and a reason for it. The process began with the women themselves. In addressing them, Paul used the term "I plead with" twice, once before each woman's name. The repetition stressed the personal interest Paul felt, and it also called them to reconciliation. Naturally, the best solution was for them to solve their own problem. The word translated "agree" (*phroneō*) is encountered frequently in this epistle. These women were to have the same attitudes and values that Christ had ([2:5-11](#)).

If the women could not resolve the problem themselves, they were to secure a mediator. Apparently the dispute was not moral, and neither woman was guilty of theological heresy. If so, Paul would have urged the erring one to submit to the Lord and the church. This was a true disagreement, and a third party could help resolve it. Paul simply identified the third party as "loyal yokefellow." Throughout history, many scholars have attempted to identify this person, but too little evidence exists. Some conclude that this is a name, Suzuge, and therefore Paul appealed to a prominent person in the church.

Next, Paul presented reasons for helping the women. First, they were Christian sisters. The last statement reveals Paul's confidence that their names were in the book of life. Paul seldom stated such confidence about people. Second, they fought with Paul for the gospel. Employing an athletic term again, he spoke of their value in the spread of the gospel. They not only helped Paul in his work but also fought alongside Clement and other unnamed fellow workers. Strangely, nothing is known about Clement. Apparently, knowing about Euodia, Syntyche, the yokefellow, and Clement was unimportant. "God *knows* them, and that too as righteous, as his own."

1. Richard R. Melick, *New American Commentary – Volume 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 145-151.

Church government is another interest sparked by this passage. Some suggest that the women had leadership roles in the congregation. However, Paul said nothing about the offices of these women. Nor did he say they preached as they labored for the Lord. Nevertheless, two indications of church order emerge here. First, Paul's appeal to an individual to mediate the problem may indicate that this individual was in a place of authority. Everyone knew both his identity and his right to intervene. Perhaps he was the pastor of the church. Second, the matter became public, and the church was to handle such matters in a way that few do today. The congregation was a partnership. As the body of Christ, the members were to address such matters objectively, frankly, lovingly, and spiritually.

(3) Exhortation to Joy and Peace [4:4-9](#)

These verses naturally divide into two major sections (vv. [4-7](#); vv. [8-9](#)), but they unite around the theme of peace. In [4:7](#) Paul wrote of the peace of God that sustains Christians during times of hardship. In [4:9](#), he wrote of the result of proper thought life ([4:8](#))—the God of peace will be present.

The passages differ from each other in significant ways. [Philippians 4:4-7](#) speaks primarily to those occasions in life when peace is lacking. They are the times when troublesome circumstances interrupt the normal flow of events. Paul gave three commands to help the readers solve these problems. In [4:8-9](#), Paul organized his thoughts to address the need for a peaceful environment. The cultivation of the proper environment brings with it the God who is peace. Some commentators see these commands as applying to the church collectively rather than to individual Christians. Because of the distributive nature of the Greek plurals, it is impossible to determine this. Often commands made collectively must be implemented individually. The commands also occur in passages describing the application of truth. In these Paul moved from the problems of the church to individual concerns. He probably had both individual Christians and the church in mind.

[Philippians 4:4-7](#) falls into two sections. Three imperatives are followed by a promise (indicative) for those who followed Paul's words. The first two commands are emphatic.

[4:4-5](#) First, Paul commanded the Philippians to rejoice. He repeated the command immediately, thereby emphasizing its importance. Their joy was to be in the Lord, and it was to be unchanging. The circumstances of Paul's life reminded him of the joy available in the Lord, and he wished that joy for them as well. Paul knew that no situation is beyond the Lord's help. Christians can always rejoice in that, if nothing else.

Second, Paul exhorted them to gentleness. No single word translates *epi-eikes* well, and commentators consistently insist that the word contains an element of selflessness. The gentle person does not insist on his rights. "It is that considerate courtesy and respect for the integrity of others which prompts a man not to be for ever standing on his rights; and it is pre-eminently the character of Jesus ([2 Cor 10:1](#))." The word occurs in Paul's writing as a characteristic of Christian leaders ([1 Tim 3:3](#), of bishops; [Titus 3:2](#)). Fairness and magnanimity were to be developed so that they were visible to all. They were to characterize the church. Paul made this emphatic by reminding them that the Lord was at hand. The statement sobers Christians for two reasons: He will come as judge, expecting to see this quality in his people; having personified the quality himself, he knows what it is like.

4:6 The third command is negative, but it has a positive thrust: “Do not be anxious about anything.” Jesus spoke about anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matt 6:25–34](#)), where he stated the most common causes of anxiety. They are: physical attributes (v. [27](#)); clothing (v. [28](#)); food and drink (v. [31](#)); and the future (v. [34](#)). Even in contemporary life with its complexities, the same simple concerns cause anxiety. Prayer cures anxiety. Here three words describe prayer. Each contributes to a proper understanding of the comprehensive nature of the prayer life. The point, however, is that prayer relieves the problem of anxiety. The center of the verse is the significant part: Prayer is to be offered “with thanksgiving.” The attitude of gratitude accompanies all true approaches to the Father.

4:7 The answer to anxiety is the peace of God. Paul made three statements about this peace. First, it is divine peace. He did not envision a situation where circumstances changed or external needs were met. This peace was a characteristic of God which invaded the Christian. Second, it “transcends all understanding.” “Transcends” translates the word *hyperechousa* (“excellent”), which is found in [2:3](#); [3:8](#), and here in a compound form. Paul contrasted knowledge and peace at one point: Peace excels over knowledge. No doubt he had in mind situations where knowledge is insufficient. Sometimes it cannot explain, and sometimes explanations do not help. Peace, however, is always appropriate and meets the need of the heart. Finally, this peace will “guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” “Guard” is a military term, implying that peace stands on duty to keep out anything that brings care and anxiety. For these reasons, prayerful people are peaceful people.

4:8–9 Paul turned his thoughts to providing an environment of peace by unified thought. The church was to make these matters its collective goal, and God would rule in them. Individual Christians were to also conduct their lives in this way. This speaks to the need of rearranging life and thought through discipline so that the God of peace can freely work.

These verses have a definite structure. They contain two lists, each introduced by its own verb. The first list completes a clause with the main verb “think about such things” (*logizesthe*, v. [8](#)). The word means far more than simple thought. The church was to count on these things and to chart its course according to them. The second list completes the verb “put into practice” (*prassetes*, v. [9](#)). By using these two verbs, Paul combined the mental and ethical concerns of his Jewish background with Christian thought. For him, knowledge always led to responsible Christian living. Some scholars point out that many secular moral philosophers could have produced the lists since there is little that is distinctive to Christianity. Because Paul seldom used many of these terms, these scholars say he probably borrowed them. Paul may have discovered a list of virtues which was acceptable to him, but the motivations and resources to develop these qualities in a Christian manner come only from the Holy Spirit who produces such fruit within.

Paul addressed the thought life first. He identified seven qualities which should characterize Christians. “True,” in the ethical sense as used here, means “truthfulness, dependability.” “Noble” translates a rare word which has a broad meaning. Used primarily by Paul in the Pastoral Epistles, it has the idea of “worthy of respect, honor, noble.” It is primarily used of church leaders, where various persons are urged to be respectable. “Right” is a translation of the Greek *dikaiosynē*, normally translated “just” (KJV). It implies giving to God and people a justness that is worthy of them. This definition differs from Paul’s normal use, but it well describes the ideal Christian virtue. “Pure” translates a word meaning “pure” or “holy” in relation to God. “Lovely” is found only here in the New Testament and has a fundamental meaning of “that which calls forth love” (*prospilē*). It covers a host of qualities but basically means that the person should be attractive, lovable. “Admirable” occurs only here in the New Testament, and it means whatever is “praiseworthy, attractive,” therefore likely not to offend. “Excellent” (*aretē*) means *morally excellent*. The word was seldom used by Paul, but in [1 Pet 2:9](#) and [2 Pet 1:3](#), [5](#) the word describes Christian virtue. Finally, “praiseworthy” means *worthy of praising God*. These characteristics would unite the church and present a good testimony to the world.

After presenting the standard for the thought life, Paul turned to Christian practice. The church was to cultivate the things it saw in Paul. Again the theme of imitation predominates. Recalling [3:1–16](#), Paul urged it to use him as a model of effective Christian living. This kind of living would result in the God of peace being with them. Often Paul greeted his friends with a prayer for peace, such as in the salutation of this epistle ([1:2](#)). In this passage the means to the answer of that prayer appear. God's peace especially resides in those who have ordered their lives in accordance with God's will. This includes proper and disciplined thoughts and good Christian living. Thus the two sets of instructions on peace complement each other. When anxiety appears, the cure is prayer. When the life is disorderly, the cure is mental and practical discipline.