



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for November 16, 2008
Released on Wednesday, November 12, 2008

"Mutual Support"

Lesson Text: Philippians 3:17–4:9

Background Scripture: Philippians 3:3–4:9

Devotional Reading: Psalm 46

Philippians 3:17–21

17 Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.

18 (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ:

19 Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)

20 For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:

21 Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.

Philippians 4:1–9

1 Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved.

2 I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord.

3 And I entreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow laborers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

5 Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.

6 Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

7 And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

9 Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe the life that Paul says results from following the godly example that he and others set.
2. Compare and contrast earthly joy with the joy of the Christian.
3. Make a plan to correct one area in his or her life that is deficient in Christian joy.

Introduction

In the classic poem "Casey at the Bat," Ernest Lawrence Thayer weaves a tale about two smalltown teams engaged in a heated battle of baseball. The story focuses on the final chance for the heroes from Mudville to win the game.

Down two runs in the final inning of play, they have managed to put a couple of men on base. Now their most powerful hitter, the mighty Casey, has come to bat with the opportunity to win the game. But, alas, there is no victory for the team that afternoon, for as Thayer put it, "There is no joy in Mudville. Mighty Casey has struck out."

Fans of every sport can testify to the empty feeling that follows the loss of a big game or match by a favorite team. The partisan passions of competition can give us great highs and lows. Beyond sports, however, many people live this way in general. Life is an emotional elevator, up one day and down the next. This is a very difficult way to live, and it exacts a heavy emotional and spiritual toll.

Churches can be like this too; however, it works a little differently. In many churches, the "good times" are in the past. We look back at old joy, but we never seem to realize current joy. Both the past victories and the current losses are greatly amplified.

A joyless church is not what Christ intended. Paul taught, "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17). Is your life or your church a place of which it could be said, "There is no joy in Mudville"? If so, this lesson will offer some biblical principles to bring joy back into your world.

Lesson Background

Paul's letter to the Philippian church was written while he was imprisoned in Rome, awaiting his trial before Caesar. This is where we leave Paul at the end of the book of Acts. Therefore, we date the letter sometime around ad 63.

Philippi was located in the Roman province of Macedonia, in the northeast section of modern Greece. By the time Paul visited Philippi on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:12; early ad 50s), the city had become an important Roman/Latin center in that Greek area. It was designated as a Roman colony, giving its residents special privileges. Many of the citizens of Philippi were descendants of Roman legionnaires who settled there after their terms of service in the army were finished.

Paul's first visit to Philippi included a time in jail. The miraculous deliverance of Paul and Silas resulted in the conversion of the jailer and his family (Acts 16:23-34). Another prominent convert in this church was a wealthy woman named Lydia (Acts 16:14).

Paul seemed to have maintained a close relationship with the Philippians over the years that followed. He remembered that they had supported him financially after he left them (Philippians 4:15, 16). The church even sent assistance to Paul while he was under house arrest in Rome. This came in the form of money and a helper named Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25; 4:18).

This visit by Epaphroditus was the occasion for Paul's letter to the Philippians. The apostle had learned of several problems that were plaguing the church. One of these was infighting among some prominent members of the congregation. This public feuding had drained the congregation of its joy. Our lesson this week explores Paul's remedy for joy-restoration and shows how his words are still applicable today.

Walking Together (Philippians 3:17-19)

1. Why did Paul call for the Philippian church to follow his example (Philippians 3:17)?

Often we ask children, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" More telling though is the question, "Whom do you want to be like when you grow up?" Children often have a person whom they seek to emulate. Sometimes it is a healthy role model—a virtuous parent or family friend. Sometimes it is a church leader who "walks the talk" of being a Christian. Unfortunately, sometimes a sleazy celebrity is appealing because of wealth and notoriety.

The Philippians' memories of Paul are still fresh enough for him to exhort them to *be followers* of him. This is because Paul strives to follow Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

As in many places, Paul's steps seem to have been dogged by the false teachers known as Judaizers. Although they claimed to be Christians, they were really trying to distort the gospel of grace by enslaving believers to the Mosaic law (Acts 15:1). These false teachers were, in fact, putting their "confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3) instead of in Christ.

In this regard, Paul urged the Philippian believers to imitate him and not to follow the Judaizers. Other worthy examples should be emulated as well. Since evil companions corrupt good morals (cf. 1 Cor. 15:33), all Christians must be careful about those we hold up as role models.

2. When Paul alluded to those who were enemies of the cross, who did he have in mind? (v. 18)

False teaching is one of the greatest enemies of the church. False teaching causes a lot of believers to stray away from the faith. Those who draw Christians away with their false teaching are considered enemies of the cross.

This is very personal for Paul, literally causing tears to well up in his eyes as he writes. These people are *enemies of the cross of Christ* and thus are Paul's enemies as well. He is not speaking abstractly, but has specific, unnamed individuals in mind who are probably known to some of the Philippians. Elsewhere, Paul does name some people like this (see 1 Timothy 1:20, 2 Timothy 4:10).

Even today, popular false teachers are usually suave and sophisticated, promoting the flesh and appealing to the flesh. Christ warned, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 7:15).

3. How did Paul describe these enemies? (v. 19)

Paul describes these enemies in four ways. First, they are headed to *destruction*. This serves as a warning to the Philippians not to follow them, for theirs is not the way of life. Second, Paul says their *God is their belly*. This means they are not controlled by the Holy Spirit, but by the appetites of the flesh. If our life goal is gratification of carnal desires, we sink deeper and deeper into depravity (see Romans 7:18).

Third, the enemies find *glory* in *shame*. They celebrate that which should embarrass them. How true this rings today in our celebrity culture, where people become famous for strident immorality! Fourth, these false leaders *mind earthly things*, meaning that they have lost any sense of spirituality and live selfishly and materialistically. They walk oblivious to the danger of the destructive life they choose and celebrate.

Walking Toward Glory (Philippians 3:20, 21)

4. How is the word “conversation” in verse 20 to be understood?

In contrast to those who were putting their hope in “earthly things” (v. 19), Paul reminded the Philippian saints that “our conversation is in heaven” (v. 20).

The Greek word translated *conversation* is quite rare in the New Testament, appearing only here. It comes from the political sphere meaning “citizenship.” As Philippi is a colony of Rome in Paul’s day (Acts 16:12), so also the church is an outpost of the homeland of Heaven, the residence of our *Lord Jesus Christ*. We await His return to end this separation finally.

This is one of the most important truths of the Christian worldview. That is, with all of its heartaches, trials, disappointments, broken relationships, and struggles, this world is not our final home. Christ will take us home, and we will be with Him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17). We take joy in believing that our home in glory will remove us from the tears of this life (see Revelation 21:4).

5. How can the truth that *this world is not our home* be misrepresented? What dangers are to be avoided when we consider this?

Truly, this world is not our permanent home. We realize that our permanent home is in Heaven. But we must be careful not to neglect the needs of this world while awaiting Heaven. Christians and churches can be guilty of adopting a fortress mentality and refusing to interact with this world.

The key is to learn how to live out the prayer of Jesus in John 17:15, 16: “I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil.” The church is to find ways to be an influence for Christ in the world through ministry to those who are in physical, emotional, and spiritual need. The words of C. T. Studd (1860–1931) should guide our efforts: “Some wish to live within the sound of church or chapel bell; I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

6. What do we know about the believer’s resurrected body? (v. 21)

When Philippians 3:21 calls our bodies “vile,” it does not mean that they are evil in themselves. Rather, our bodies are lowly and subject to humiliation.

One aspect of this glorious future that is particularly precious to Paul is the promise of a resurrection *body*. While there are many questions concerning the resurrection body, one thing is sure: it will be made similar to the glorious body of Jesus. Just as Christ had a glorified body after He arose from the tomb (Luke 24:36–42), so believers will receive a new body fit for everlasting life (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35–44; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 1 John 3:2). Imagine having a body that will not decay over the years and will remain healthy forever!

They will be suitable for an eternity in Heaven with God. The final terror of humanity—death—will be vanquished (1 Cor. 15:26), for Christ will be the complete master of all things (Philippians 2:10, 11).

Stand Together (Philippians 4:1–3)

7. How did Paul feel about the church at Philippi? (Philippians 4:1)

Paul describes his *beloved* Philippians as his *joy and crown*. He takes great satisfaction in their continued faithfulness and good works. He is able to pray about them with joy (see Philippians 1:3–6), believing in their endurance to the end. They are his crown in the sense that we say righteous children are jewels on the crown of a faithful mother. This is not the crown of power or dominion, but of reward for a job well done. It is the award crown given to the victor in athletic contests, the laurel of honor.

Paul switches metaphors from walking (living) to standing (persevering). To *stand fast in the Lord* is an act of faith in Christ. It is a unifying act, for the Philippians all

have the same Lord. The result of this is to give them security in their fellowship, the "safety in numbers" effect. Paul is not telling them to "go along with the crowd," but to stand together with others who are following Christ.

That the Philippians had a special place in Paul's heart is seen in such expressions as "longed for," "joy and crown," and "dearly beloved" (Phil. 4:1). While Paul had deep concern for all the churches he founded or labored with (2 Cor. 11:28), he did not refer to other congregations as he did to the Philippians.

8. What conflict existed in the congregation? What was Paul's advice to those in conflict? (vs. 2, 3)

While there were minimal problems at the church at Philippi, there were some interpersonal conflicts. Two Christian women, Euodias and Syntyche, had a dispute. Paul knew from experience that conflict can divide the church, so Paul urged them to "be of the same mind in the Lord" (4:2). They needed to come to some kind of agreement concerning their conflict.

An entreaty was also made to another individual identified as "true yokefellow" (Phil. 4:3). "Yokefellow" is the word, or name, "Syzygus." Since this could be a personal name, it might refer to one of the leaders in the church. If so, he was to intervene and arbitrate between these two ladies. That these women had labored with Paul in the work of the gospel indicates that they were prominent church members and certainly had the power to influence others to take sides in their dispute. While it may be natural for us to attempt to garner support in a conflict, doing so can have disastrous consequences and divide families and churches. For the sake of the gospel, we must not be quick to take sides in any controversy.

Also mentioned is Clement, presumably a leader in the church or a coworker of the apostle. Not wanting to exclude anyone, Paul noted other fellow laborers, whose names are written in the book of life.

9. What is "the book of life?" (v. 3)

Paul refers to his beloved Philippian believers as having their names written in *the book of life*. The book of life is the register of those who are God's children (Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Luke 10:20; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15). Cities like Philippi had a register of all their citizens, but having our names in the heavenly register is far more important.

This is also another factor in the church's unity in Christ: our common destiny. This begs a question: If I am going to spend eternity with this person, shouldn't I be working on getting along with him or her now?

Rejoicing Together (Philippians 4:4-9)

10. What is the major theme of the book of Philippians? What words indicate this? (vs. 4, 5)

Key words in Philippians are "joy" (1:4, 25; 2:2) and "rejoice" (1:18; 2:16-18). Here in verse 4 of today's lesson Paul gives the entire church a simple command to be joyful. This is not a contingent command based on a particular circumstance. Paul calls for unconditional rejoicing. There is no need to wait for something beneficial.

Paul knows that the Christian life should always be joyful, even under the most difficult circumstances. Similar admonitions are found frequently in the Psalms, such as "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart" (Psalm 32:11).

There is great unity to be found in laying down our weapons (words and deeds) and joining together in joyful praise to God. We can release our fears and doubts as we fulfill our created purpose of glorifying God. In a world full of doleful and self-absorbed people, it is wonderful to encounter a person with the deep-seated joy that

Paul speaks of here. This joy is contagious, and soon we find that we “rejoice with them that do rejoice” (Romans 12:15).

The word “moderation” in Philippians 4:5 could be translated “gentleness” or “graciousness.” The idea is that unbelievers ought to see something attractive in those who profess faith in Christ. If the only thing unbelievers see in the church is wrangling, they will be convinced that what we possess is not something they want!

11. What basic instructions did Paul give concerning prayer? (v. 6)

To “be careful for nothing” means we should not be worried or anxious about anything. The cure for worry is to bring our burdens to the Lord and leave them there. As indicated in the Sermon on the Mount, worrying is evidence of a weak faith (Matt. 6:25-34).

One of the functions of prayer is to give us a release for our worries by communicating our concerns to God. Peter taught that we should cast all our cares on God, because He cares for us deeply (1 Peter 5:7). This may be done corporately for the whole church (what Paul has in view here) or by the individual believer.

Paul tells the reader to give thanks to God in all prayer and supplication. Prayer refers to general communication while supplication refers to specific request made to God by His people. Even in the darkest hour, there are things for which we can thank God (1 Thess. 5:18). Although God knows our needs before we ask (Matt. 6:8), our requests still need to be expressed to Him.

12. How does the peace of God pass all understanding? (v. 7)

While our prayers are not always answered in ways we had hoped, the promise that the peace of God, which transcends human understanding, abides with us is a great comfort. That the peace of God passes all understanding “may mean that it offers more than we can devise or that it is unfathomable. It is beyond the mind’s power to attain, understand, or imagine, but not beyond God’s power to give. It is the sense of acceptance, assurance, the poise, the serenity which one may know within whatever the situation without” (Allen).

As Paul wrote these words, he was in Roman confinement, not knowing the eventual outcome. If anyone needed to experience the peace of God, it was Paul! Nevertheless, these events had actually served to advance the gospel (Phil. 1:12-14). Confident that all things work together for good to those that love God” (Rom. 8:28), Paul could reassure the Philippians that that they too could enjoy this peace.

13. How can verse 8 be helpful to us as we walk with Christ Jesus?

As Paul brought the epistle to a close, he called upon those in the church to examine their lives in light of the things they said, thought, and did.

Paul’s urges us to find joy in the simple virtues of life: truth, honesty, justice, purity, beauty, commendability. If these are characteristics that we want in our lives, we should celebrate when we see them demonstrated by others.

The sad fact is that modern society often fears truth, lacks honesty, perverts justice, ridicules purity, exploits beauty, and disregards the need for a good reputation. We, as believers, can do better. We can take joy when we see these virtues displayed, even among nonbelievers, for we know that all virtue has its ultimate source in God.

Paul ends this section (v. 9) as he began (Philippians 3:17): by urging the Philippian community of believers to follow his example. Paul does not say this because he believes his own conduct is perfect, but because he is fully devoted to serving Christ. Life dedicated to Christ will yield rest in the storm, the comforting presence of God.

Conclusion

As we near the time for Christmas merchandising, we begin to see the word Joy sprinkled on holiday items everywhere. Business-wise, this is safe. Who can object to such a happy little word? In the Christian faith, however, joy has a much deeper significance than being a commercial tagline. In the context of the Christmas story, joy is the response to the wonderful news that Jesus the Messiah has been born, that God has put on human flesh to take away the sins of the world.

The Bible teaches that joy is much more than a happy feeling experienced by Christians once a year. Joy is to be an ongoing characteristic of the Christian believer, a deep-seated attitude that does not depend on the fortunes of this life. Joy is part of who we are as God's children. Yet many Christians live lives where joy is rare. Many churches are joyless places. The apostle Paul saw this situation arise in the church at Philippi, one of his most beloved congregations.

For Paul, joy is our proper and natural response to the love and grace of God. Since God's love does not waver or change, our inner joy and peace can be strong and stable. We can be joyous even when our lives are going through sorrow or unhappiness. This is why James can make the seemingly contradictory statement "count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2). If our eyes and hearts are turned to Jesus, we should experience His joy. But if we are diverted into squabbling with brothers and sisters, that joy can evaporate easily.

Think, then, of your own life and your relationship to others in your church. Are you a positive influence in bringing joy into the lives of others? Have you lost your own sense of peace in joyful service to the Lord and to His church? Are you a person of whom it could be said, "She is always rejoicing"? Don't leave this lesson without resolving to be a rejoicer in all your tasks, roles, and responsibilities.

Prayer

God of peace and joy, we praise You in the unity of our spirits. We thank You for Your love and grace, so undeserved but so appreciated. May we find unity and peace among our fellow believers, and may that translate into joy in our lives. We pray this in the name of the Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Thought to Remember

Joy is possible with or without happiness.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Study 2 Timothy 2:1-3 and 4:1-5 "A Good Example" and look for terms Paul used with his young protégé, such as "teachers," "soldier," and "evangelist." Who are people with "itching ears" who "will not endure sound doctrine"? What is "full proof of [one's] ministry"?

Until next week,..."May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." -2 Corinthians 13:14.

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The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books