

Rejoicing in Christ (How to survive the local church and life!)

'how to survive the local church' is how someone has entitled this passage but actually I think Paul is giving practical wisdom for the Christian for everyday life which centres round finding rejoicing in Christ.

So the title for today is rejoicing in Christ with the subtitle – how to survive the local church and life!

And how we do life is the subject of many a book. The Scotsman last week ran a multi page article, which was a gift for preachers, on just that. The heading was (show paper) 'Happiness and why we struggle to find it'. The subheading then read

“A new report in the Economist says Britain has never had it so good and yet experts agree we have never suffered from so much stress and anxiety”

The new name for this kind ironic stressful malaise? – affluenza. Our affluence is stressing us out! The more we have the more we want and the higher the price we have to pay to get it – working longer hours or seek more responsibility and so on.

Is there then any ancient wisdom from the bible on this? Well, yes there is.

Not least the words of Jesus himself

Mark 8:36 ³⁶ What good is it for a man to **gain** the whole **world**, yet forfeit his **soul**?

The great transaction – our souls for what in the end of the day is a few extra trinkets in the jewellery box!

The centrifugal verse of this passage is probably verse 4 “Rejoice in the Lord”. Where Paul demonstrates that a Christian has joy but it stems not from getting wealthy but from their relationship to God – to Christ. “Rejoice in the Lord”

The Scotsman talks of happiness but God in his word speaks of joy. One person commented

“Joy is a Christian virtue; happiness is a virtue of the world. There is all the difference in the world between them”

What does he mean by that? Essentially happiness comes from external circumstances - pleasant chance happenings, watching a movie, meals with friends, playing sport, success, looking good, a good family life, youth or just an absence of hassle. Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet! But what happens when the money runs out, illness hits, there is major issues at work, relational crisis – when the externals go? Happiness flees like morning mist doesn't it?

But joy is listed as a fruit of the Spirit. In other words it is a supernatural work of God in the life of the believer. Joy is God's gift to forgiven people.

This joy in the Lord, in God and his redeeming work in our lives is then internal and not dependant on external circumstances. Don't forget Paul is writing these words from prison, chained to a praetorian guard with the executioners blade glinting in the corner. His life is coming to an end but he has found in Christ a hope to face steely reality with the joy of the Lord as his strength.

But Paul isolates some of the joy killers and church fellowship wreckers in the Philippian church:

Firstly there was conflict and division and so Paul points to *the importance of right relationships* 2-3. Secondly the Philippians were fearful and so he points to *the importance of right reactions* 4-7. And finally rather than letting bitterness take root he points to *the importance of right thinking* 8-9. I think we will find these words of wisdom will reverberate in our own souls and context.

Bibles open!

The Importance of Right Relationships 2-3

4:2 *"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask*

you, loyal yoke fellow, help these women who have contented at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with clement and the rest of my fellow-workers, whose names are in the book of life"

What had happened? Character clash, temperament clash, ego, pride, misunderstanding, lack of communication, words in anger, feelings of being wronged, words got back through gossip, not able to keep a confidence?

Whatever such conflict situations are not uncommon in the workplace and the church, because it is full of sinful people like you and me is not exempt from such things.

I think we can tend to look at the early church through rose tinted spectacles and think it had a panacea for peace and kingdom growth.

It is really interesting how Paul deals with this. Firstly, though I think he has been hedging about the issue till now finally he confronts it. This is church leadership in action - at times needing to confront wrongs but graciously! Secondly notice in these verses he does not focus on the issue but the relationship. Because as someone has said, 'you don't have to see eye to eye to walk arm in arm'.

The difficulty of unresolved conflict is that it can dramatically damage the effectiveness of the church.

People start to take sides and it becomes a huge distraction. The Devil delights to distract a fellowship with internal bickering – if we are bickering we are not bothering him and his work of God’s kingdom destruction. But if we are rejoicing in the Lord and his mercy we are not going to be nit picking with other Christians.

You are a diverse fellowship. Diverse in age, interests, temperaments, nationalities, socio-economic backgrounds, denominational backgrounds, Christian traditions and expectations of church. The one thing that defines you as Christian and as a Christian fellowship is a belief in the atoning death of Jesus on the cross for our sins and the need for a personal fully devoted faith in Christ to receive his forgiveness and eternal life with him. That is the basic assumption of the bible and any church. But on many other issues you may disagree – pacifism, biblical politics, churchmanship, Sunday observance and so on. They do not enter into the substance of the faith and so I think there is scope for difference of opinion. A secret then for future stability, future growth and future continued and increasing joy and rejoicing in the Lord is the importance of right relationships – finding agreement in the Lord. Especially for you now that you are a linkage with Plean and Cowie. So if there is any disagreement amongst you it is time to get them sorted. There is no room for resentments or rivalry. Bitterness or belligerence. The eternal destinies of the men,

women and children of Fallin, Plean and Cowie depend on it.

The second aspect Paul isolates to help maintain their joy in the Lord and the health of their fellowship is

The importance of Right reactions 4-7

4 “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.”

Have you ever met a Christian brother or sister and you have been tempted to look at the top of their head for antenna or something because you secretly suspect they are from another planet. Everything for them is wonderful, they are always smiling, their skin has this shiny thing going on with it and you wonder if they are really sincere. Then you feel guilty for feeling that way about them and think, actually should I be feeling like that is that what is really means to rejoice in the Lord always?

We should probably feel guilty for feeling that way. The thing is that the joy of the Lord is a supernatural work of God by his spirit in our lives. When the Spirit

of God hits human personality and the human soul I think all manner of things might happen. Personality types may be changed – I have seen one of the most sombre guys I knew become one of the most effervescent. Drunkards dried up. But also ordinary folks just more deeply contented in God and that bit more joyful.

Paul kind of underlines it. Rejoice in the Lord, it is as if he imagines the response, ‘Aye right’, so he says, ‘I say it again rejoice in the Lord’. Double emphasis means that we need to take note. That even when things are grim God is present to give what is needed. I remember when my mother was dying of cancer. My father by this point was already dead 5 years. It was a tough period but close to the end one of things that sustained us all was the sense of being upheld in prayer. It is as if we were all given extraordinary inner strength to carry on each day. And so even in the midst of pain there was gratitude to God.

Where are you at with God’s gift of joy for you?

Nehemiah during a period of revival encouraged the people to find the joy of the Lord as their strength (Neh 8:10). Where does your strength from daily living come from? The Lord and his joy giving work? Or from the externals. The deep work of God or the shallow of the world? (pause)

That work of God will change our reactions to circumstances. Some folks seem to flair up and be angered at the slightest thing don’t they? Paul says let the grace God shows to you make you gracious, gentle or reasonable. This is also another evidence of God’s work in your life. What are the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5? Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self control. That gentle, gracious reasonableness is evidence of God at work in and through you.

Actually reasonableness and gentleness is sometimes difficult to find. People so easily get on their high horse especially when it comes to goods and services. We got a new suite recently and it was delivered 3 weeks late. Whilst waiting for it to be delivered I went into the shop to get an update on delivery and the poor sales woman turned white when I mentioned that I was wondering about a delivery date. I get the impression she had been verbally abused by quite a few. I actually was not bothered, just was passing by the door and thought I would go in and ask.

Be the exception – be exceptional. Let your gentleness be evident to all. Don’t be overly rigorous on unimportant matters. That does not mean be a pushover but rather sometimes leave space for grace before reproach! This kind of gentleness Paul speaks of knows that rules and regulations are not the last word. And who better exemplifies this than the

saviour himself as we saw in chapter 2 whose coming should regulate all our actions as Paul says, ‘the Lord is near’

There was a lack of joy, gentleness and a lack of peace, “do not be anxious” says Paul. The work of the Spirit was being curbed in their life together.

When I was running at schoolboy national and international competition level my coach, John Tonner, gave us all a tape with a relaxation technique with Sebastian Coe’s father on it. As the coach handed over the tape he said – tenseness when competing and training will impede your ability – it saps up energy and reduces flow of style and technique.

Anxiety will impede our Christian life. Prayer, says Paul, those moments in silence before God is to be your stress buster.

Do not be anxious about anything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

How does the hymn go?

“Father I place into your hands the things I cannot do.

Father I place into your hands the times I’ve been through.

Father, I place into your hands the way that I should go, for I know I always can trust you

Father, I place into your hands My friends and family.

Father, I place into your hands The things that trouble me.

Father, I place into your hands the person I would be, For I know I always can trust you.

Give it to God in prayer. Regularly, often. I want us all to take a moment in prayer. (MP 133 words of the hymn) Give over to God the things that are causing you anxiety and let the peace of God guard your heart and mind. If you hear someone crying and you are near just put your hand on their shoulder or arm. Let’s take a moment to put this into practice. (pause)

This Time Tomorrow – right relating, right reacting?

4 “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Says Paul

Let the joy of the Lord be your strength – says Nehemiah

Trust in the Lord, lean on him day by day says Calum!