

Thanksgiving Day

November 25, 2015

Sermon Text: Philippians 4:4-7

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⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I am sure that you have seen it by now. Images of mashed potatoes and gravy, green bean casserole, buns and rolls, cranberry sauce and salads filling every square inch of a massive table. Families gather around this feast— children smiling, adults swaying with laughter, and

the host sits at the head of the table. Finally, out comes the cook with a steaming golden brown turkey in hand. All eyes follow as it is placed right in the middle of the table.

Who would not be thankful for such a meal? Each year our nation sets aside one specific day for this moment. A chance to be thankful for the food that you have. A chance to count your blessings of a house and your family and all of your possession inside it. An opportunity to recall the status of your health or your financial goals or the special trips you took. One day each year people stop to give thanks for all they own.

Is that how long your Thanksgiving lasts— just one day? When Thanksgiving Day itself ends and you return to your job or your post-holiday routine, do you still find much to be thankful for? When fall flips into winter and winter into spring, spring into summer, does your heart still pour out thanks to God for all that you have?

The apostle Paul has the answer to that question. He says: **REJOICE ALWAYS!** *for what you have and for what you need.*

That is the first verse of our reading: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** That joy has no end. Paul encourages you to remain in this state of happiness now, tonight, tomorrow, next week—always.

When you stop and think about those words, it is true; we should give thanks every day. You see the things you have. Your family, your health, your home, heat, food, clothing, an income, time to enjoy fun, seasons filled with different celebrations— and the list could really go on. We have so many things to be thankful for. If you ever lived without one of those blessings, your joy is that more grateful for what God has given you.

Maybe that is what makes Paul’s encouragement a point of tension in life. On the one hand, we know that we should rejoice always— rejoicing that God continually showers us with blessings. Yet, sometimes life does not seem to give much to rejoice about, does it? Terrorism stirs up fear, not reasons to rejoice. Someone you love may flaunt life-choices which ignore your God’s instructions. Unexpected sickness brings expenses which brings stress which brings anxiety. You may feel unloved, uncared for, and the mere presence of that void does not cause much to rejoicing about. Perhaps your life has not changed much. So you find no special reason to rejoice over the things you already are so accustomed to

receiving. In fact, maybe just looking over the past year, you find that you had more reasons to grumble than you ever did to rejoice.

Even though Paul urges you to **“REJOICE ALWAYS!”** you might find a greater reason to **“Complain Always!”** To complain that God failed you by not removing every trouble in your life. To complain that God really does not know what is best for you or your family. To complain about the ways God watches over your life in today’s society. How easily we complain about the things that go wrong or the things we feel are still missing in life that soon we find fault with God! Yet, when we complain, are we not really saying that we know how to manage our lives better than God himself?

Chains rattle as this thoughtful encouragement is intentionally written down. About 2,000 years ago, the apostle Paul encourages you (today) to **REJOICE ALWAYS** *for what you have!* Yet, he is not sitting in a lavish mansion filled with servants and food and luxuries. He sits in a house, chained to a Roman soldier, under arrest for made-up crimes. All he did was open his mouth to proclaim the same Word of God you hear today. While he preached, those who were upset did not simply leave. Instead, they shout over him, arrest him, and imprison him in the hope to silence any mention of God’s Word.

The one person who would have the most reason not to rejoice is the one encouraging you to **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** Paul is not suggesting that your troubles are over-exaggerated and embellished. He is not saying that you should ignore your challenges or become numbingly insensitive to each other’s burdens. No, he recognizes that you might feel crushed and broken and helpless, left with no reason to ever rejoice. Still he points you to the cross and reminds you that your rejoicing comes from and is motivated by being **in the Lord**.

That cross stands a visible marker of the relationship God has with you. You believe that Jesus is your Savior from sin. This faith marks you as being “in the Lord;” you are listed as someone whom God loves; you live life with God on your side. Consider *what you have* because of this relationship.

First, you have a God who knew what you needed. Yes, he knows that you live life in this world and you have many worldly needs. Yet, he takes great lengths to make sure that when you leave this earth, you will be able to stand before him eternally. God wants us to love him with all our heart— never once grumbling, never once thinking that we know how to manage life more than our all-knowing Creator! ([Matthew 22:37](#)). For all those times we grumble and complain, God sends his only Son to live a life of perfect contentment.

If you ever feel like life has no reason to ever rejoice, then look to the cross. Remember how the perfect and innocent Son of God dies your death. He removes every stain of sin. He clothes you with his blameless life. Through Jesus alone, God calls you an “heir of eternal life.”

Make no mistake about it— both believer and nonbeliever rejoice in life; many will give thanks. Those who reject the Savior do have money and possessions and houses and cars (maybe even more than you can ever hope to have). Yet, that time of rejoicing will reach its end. When death rips away every earthly possession, rejoicing will not be heard in hell. For that reason, you and I **“Rejoice in the Lord always!”** because only in the Lord

do you have something far greater than worldly possessions. Only in the Lord do you receive the peace of knowing your sins are removed from the sight of God. You **REJOICE ALWAYS** *for what you have!*

Yet, consider what else you have in the Lord. You have a God who also cares for your life on earth. God has not abandoned you, leaving you to wander around until his second coming. That is why Paul again encourages you: **Do not be anxious about anything...** Sometimes so many thoughts about the future flood your mind that you feel like you are pulled in several different directions. You may be happy knowing that God is your God, but you still confront those worldly troubles. Terrorism halfway around the world limits your freedom here. Children of all ages bring unimaginable stress. Doctor visits leave you wondering about your future health. Feeling unloved stirs up feelings of loneliness. Those concerns rest on your mind. They keep you awake at night. They dim out your reason to **REJOICE ALWAYS.**

Paul tells you why you do not need to be anxious. [... **I]n everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** Your God is the Provider of all and he invites you to meet him in prayer. You can bring everything to him— every worry, every concern, every anxiety, every question and plea about your future. He listens to every prayer and to every specific request. God does not have business hours, that he stops listening to you after an appointed time. He does not care only about your “big” problems, issues that greatly impact your life. He does not tell you to make sure that your prayers are asking for something worthwhile. No, the statement is present tense— you continue praying to God in every situation in life.

You offer up your prayers in thanksgiving— with rejoicing—because your God is more than able to give you all you need. Sometimes God answers your prayers better than you ever imagined. So, it means that when you ask for one thing, God may bless you with something greater, something that you might not realize until you remember what you asked for in the first place. At other times, God recognizes that your request may harm you. So again, he answers your petitions with blessings different from what you asked at first. At all times, God reminds you that his love so clearly demonstrated on the cross still rests on you. As you present prayers and specific requests, God reminds you to lift up your eyes and trust his judgment, his knowledge, his guidance ([2 Corinthians 12:9](#)). So you **REJOICE ALWAYS**—even *for what you need*— because your God invites you to ask him for what you need.

Knowing that your God will answer you in his perfect wisdom, you have peace. Paul describes that peace, saying: **And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** That peace which comes from God guards your heart just like an armed soldier guards a door. God’s peace keeps fear from creeping in because you know that your sins have been forgiven. God’s peace keeps anxiety from overtaking your mind because you know God’s promises are as good as done. God’s peace keeps worry from driving your mind because you know that God walks with you right now. That peace alone gives you reason to **REJOICE ALWAYS!** because God has provided for all of your needs.

Yes, each year our nation sets aside one day in order to give thanks for everything we have. People will gather around food, around family, around memories. They will be thankful for the joys all these things give them.

Yet, the picture of a warm, happy, thankful family really does not remain too long, does it? Tomorrow is Black Friday—a day many shop for fantastic sales, but also a day which finds people pepper spraying others in order to get a video game or fistfights to get farther ahead in a line or ambulances called to rescue people from mass stampedes. That rejoicing on Thanksgiving vanishes quite quickly.

Your thanksgiving does not vanish that quickly. As fall flips into winter and winter into spring, spring into summer, you continue rejoicing that your God meets your every need. Jesus died for you; your sins are forgiven. Your God remains with you; he hears your every prayer and petition. So, **REJOICE ALWAYS!** *for what you have, for what you need.*