

Text: Phil. 4:6-9

Title: "Care for the peace of the local church"

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: I grew up in Mentor, OH, which is about 25 miles east of Cleveland. I did so in the 70s and 80s, during a period in which Cleveland had a public relations problem. Even those of us who lived in Northeast Ohio thought of the city as the "Mistake on the Lake."

The Cuyahoga River runs through Cleveland, and it was known in those days especially as the river that burned. Due to the pollution that was once in the river, the Cuyahoga has caught fire 13 times since 1868. The last of these happened in 1969, after which *Time* magazine did a feature article on the incident, bringing nationwide infamy on all us Clevelanders.

Rivers catching on fire are newsworthy because we do not normally think of water and fire existing together. Conditions must be dry in order to get a fire going, and if you want to extinguish a fire, one way to do so is to pour water on it. Simply put, fire and water do not mix.

Paul speaks of two life experiences that do not mix in this passage. Anxiety and peace do not mix. Where you have anxiety, you do not have peace. Where you have peace, you do not have anxiety.

We often think of stress, anxiety, and a lack of peace as a personal problem. We think of peace as something that we hope to experience as individuals. Those conclusions about anxiety and peace are certainly correct. The stress of worry is a personal problem, and individual peace is a noble goal. Often the loneliness of the individual is contributing to his sense of worry and anxiety.

But when Paul issues the command to be anxious for nothing and to let prayer give peace (v. 6), to think (v. 8) and to do (v. 9), he uses plural verbs for those commands. He wants us as a local church to obey these same commands together. He wants our church to be anxious for nothing. He wants our church to have the peace of God ruling in our hearts.

So just as the first five verses of this chapter were about caring for the joyful unity of the local church, our passage today is focused on caring for the peace of the local church (v. 7, “and the peace of God . . . shall keep your [plural] hearts and minds”; v. 9, “the God of peace shall be with you [plural]”).

Local churches need the God of peace to protect them with the peace of God. We are at war. We are the church militant. In the midst of battle, we need God’s peace. That is the focus of this passage. Our Lord asks us as a local church to focus on three Pauline commands to experience His peace.

I. Pray together (vv. 6-7).

Illustration: There are many things we face in life about which we have little choice. This past week I received a second opinion about recommended surgery that was the same as the first opinion. It feels like I do not have much choice about surgery. Life just does that to us in this fallen world. It causes us to experience suffering that we cannot avoid.

Application: But Paul speaks of a choice that we do have under these circumstances. I do not have a choice about surgery, it would seem, but I do have a choice about whether to be anxious, worried, or stress laden over it. Paul says, “Be anxious for nothing, but choose the way of peace instead.”

So, we have a choice, but it is a very specific choice. We can choose not to worry, but we must choose to pray in order to

choose the way of peace. Prayer is the pathway to peace. So the practical choice we have in times of difficulty is between worry and prayer. The world tells us to deal with anxiety in other ways: "Take more medication" or "look on the bright side" or "do Yoga" or "don't worry, be happy." In the end, those are false choices. The true choice we have is between a life of anxiety and worry and a life of prayer.

Now the problem that creates for many of us is that we have not yet learned how to pray. Paul uses two words as he explains the choice we have to pray instead of worry, which help us all understand what it means to pray.

1. The first word is the basic word *prayer*. What is unique about that word is that it is an activity that we only do to our God. I can ask for things from just about anyone, but when I say that I have prayed for something, I mean that I have approached my God about that thing. So, to be a man of prayer is to be a man with a prayer-hearing God. To have never prayed, is to know no prayer-hearing God.

Illustration: So the first prayer someone prays is often the first time they believe that they have a prayer-hearing God. Do you remember the first time you really prayed knowing that God would hear your prayer?

For me, that happened when I was about 12 years old. Walking home from a gospel meeting at church, I was under conviction over my sin. I knew that I needed forgiveness through Christ to escape God's just judgment. I stopped under a tree that evening, and for the first time I prayed knowing that God was my God. I had said prayers before, but this time on bent knee and with head bowed, I knew that I was before my prayer-hearing God. I told Him I believed Christ died and rose from the dead for me, and I asked Him to save me from my sins. He heard me and did that for me.

2 The second word is *supplication*. This word refers to the content of our prayers. Jesus instructed His disciples about the content of their prayers. He said, "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Matt. 6:7). That kind of vain repetition is encouraged as prayer in many false religions.

The content of true prayer is supplication, and supplication is simply what the rest of the verse says that it is: "with thanksgiving make your requests known unto God." In spite of the trials we face, you and I have much for which to be thankful. True prayer is thanking the Lord for those things. And because of the trials we face, we need the Lord's help with some very specific things. True prayer is asking specifically for those things.

When we choose prayer instead of worry, God promises something truly remarkable. He promises that the peace of God shall keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. The word translated *keep* here is a military word. It refers to a defensive position in battle. In John Bunyan's classic allegory, *Holy War*, someone named Mr. God's-Peace rules over the town of Mansoul when the town is right with Emmanuel. Bunyan explains, "This man, as I said, was made governor of the town in general, especially over the castle" (p. 184). Bunyan, who suffered greatly for his stand for Christ as a separatist Baptist, understood well the soul-protection available through prayer. We are engaged in a holy war. Our enemy seeks to destroy our hearts and our minds, but we have a choice. We can choose to pray.

Paul explains that this peace "passes understanding." The 16th century reformer, John Calvin, wrote of his prayer experience with a peace from God that passes understanding: "Nothing is more foreign to the human mind, than in the

depth of despair to exercise, nevertheless, a feeling of hope, in the depth of poverty to see opulence, and in the depth of weakness to keep from giving way, and, in fine, to promise ourselves that nothing will be wanting to us when we are left destitute of all things; and all this in the grace of God alone, which is not itself known otherwise than through the word, and the inward earnest of the Spirit." This hope, opulence, and strength to not give way is promised to those who choose to pray. We are protected by the God of peace with the peace of God when we choose to pray together.

II. Think together (v. 8).

Illustration: The command of verse 8 is *think on these things*. Our world is losing its capacity to think. Covid exposed many weaknesses in our culture, including how much difficulty we have today with thinking correctly.

Application: Our ability to think correctly is going to be greatly affected by our starting point or our worldview. The Greek word Paul uses in his command to think here is *logizomai*, from which we get our word *logic*. *Logizomai* is related to the word *logos*, which is translated *Word* in John 1, referring to Jesus Christ. John says, "In the beginning was the Word" and "All things were made by Him."

When we accept that the Word created all things, He becomes the beginning of our worldview. Things make sense, and we are able to think more clearly with that starting point. If there is no Word in the beginning of our worldview, no Creator God who thinks correctly, then things no longer make sense and thinking correctly becomes much harder.

Paul gives us six thought-patterns that should regulate our thinking, and the six divide nicely into three areas of our thought life. In each of these areas, we must begin with the

authority of our Creator if we are going to think correctly. The three categories of thoughts are thoughts about (1) reality; (2) morality; and (3) aesthetics or beauty.

When we are thinking correctly about reality, we understand the difference between what is real and what is imaginary. So, Paul says, “whatsoever things are true” and “whatsoever things are honest.” The ability to think on the true and the honest is the ability to not be deceived by the false and the lying. When our thinking begins with what our Creator God says is the difference between the real and the imaginary, our thinking will be based on truth and honesty.

When we are thinking correctly about morality, we understand the difference between right and wrong. So, Paul says, “whatsoever things are just” and “whatsoever things are pure.” The ability to think on the just and the pure is the ability to not be corrupted by the unjust and the impure. When our thinking begins with what our Creator God says is the difference between right and wrong, our thinking will be based on what is just and pure.

Finally, when we are thinking correctly about aesthetics, we understand the difference between beauty and ugliness. So, Paul says, “whatsoever things are lovely” and “whatsoever things are of good report.” The ability to think on the lovely and the things of good report is the ability to not be attracted to the unlovely and the things of ill repute. When our thinking begins with what our Creator God says is the difference between the beautiful and the ugly, our thinking will be based on what is lovely and what is of good report.

Illustration: Melvin Calvin was a Nobel Prize winning chemist who taught at UC Berkeley. He authored a book titled *Chemical Evolution* on the origin of life, in which he wrote a paragraph about the origin of modern science: “As I try to

discern the origin of that conviction [that the universe could be understood rationally], I seem to find it in a basic notion discovered 2,000 or 3,000 years ago, and enunciated first in the Western world by the ancient Hebrews, namely, that the universe is governed by a single God, and is not the product of the whims of many gods, each governing his own province according to his own laws. This monotheistic view seems to be the historical foundation for modern science” [quoted by Eric Metaxas, *Is Atheism Dead?*, 349].

The foundation for thinking scientifically is also our foundation for thinking in every area of life – reality, morality, and beauty. The God of peace protects us with the peace of God when we learn to think on these things this way together.

III. Do together (v. 9).

Illustration: My wife and I at times struggle with our need to get the exercise we should, like going for a walk. It is one thing to do a lot of research on the health benefits of walking, but it is something else entirely to actually get up and walk up over that hill (my dog does not seem to struggle in this way for some reason).

Application: Paul understands that running the race of local church faithfulness is like that. In theory, we know that Paul did the right thing when it came to serving the Lord. Like the Philippians he is writing here, we can read our New Testaments and learn from Paul, receive from Paul, hear from Paul, and see what Paul did. We can say we love the church and hope the best for it. But Paul says, “Do!” We need to faithfully obey together all that we learn from the Apostle Paul – put it into faithful practice – in order to experience the presence and power of the God of peace. This means serving one another with our giftedness, making disciples with one another, and worshipping our Lord together.

The God of peace was with Paul as he not only read about these things, but did them. If we do like Paul, He will bless us in the same way.

Conclusion: A church that is protected by the peace of God from the God of peace is a church that prays together, thinks together, and obeys together. Our church will become that kind of church to the degree you and I are willing to become that kind of church member.

We have a choice. We can worry prayerlessly like the world, think incorrectly like the world, and disobey what Paul teaches us about our NT responsibilities like the world. Or we can choose to work at praying together, thinking together, and obeying together. Choosing the latter will care for the peace of our local church. The One who hears our prayers is the God of peace. We can trust Him for the peace of God.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching