

Cheerful Counsel for Christians Philippians 4:1-13

by J.R. Miller

J.R. Miller's sermon emphasizes the importance of joy, gentleness, and reliance on Christ for strength and contentment in the Christian life.

Scripture: Philippians 4:1

Topics: "Joy in Christ", "Christian Living"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the joy and encouragement found in Paul's letter to the Philippians, written from prison yet filled with love and hope for the church. He highlights key lessons such as steadfastness, unity, joy, gentleness, and the importance of not being anxious, urging believers to bring their worries to God. Miller explains that true Christian joy is rooted in a relationship with Christ, transcending circumstances, and that gentleness should be evident in our interactions. He also stresses the significance of thinking on noble qualities and practicing them, as well as learning contentment through Christ's strength. Ultimately, Miller reassures that with God's help, Christians can accomplish all that He calls them to do.

Transcript

The Epistle to the Philippians is full of cheer and inspiration. Although written in a prison, a sweet song sings through it all. No other of the churches established by Paul, seems to have given him so much comfort--as did this church at Philippi. His cheerful counsels to these church members are golden words for all Christians. The passage begins with an expression of the apostle's love for his people, from whom now he was separated. He speaks to them as beloved and longed for, his joy and crown. No reward that a pastor can have is so great as souls led to Christ and lives helped, built up, and enriched.

The first lesson taught is that of steadfastness. "Stand fast in the Lord."

Next, he exhorts them to unity in spirit and life. It would seem that two women, Euodias and Syntyche, had been estranged in some way, and Paul writes to his yokefellow, urging him to seek a restoration of kindly relations between them. Paul thus sought to realize the Beatitude, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called children of God." It is a pleasant thought, that the names of all those who live and work for Christ are in the book of life. They may not be written in the list of those who are distinguished on the earth--but the humblest and lowliest name is down in the register of heaven.

The keynote of Paul's life from the first to last is joy. We have it here, "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice!" This word sounds a little strange, coming from a prison. But Paul had in his heart, that which mastered all gloom and depression. Christians ought always to be happy. Of course this does not mean that they should be foolish. Christian joy is not silly giggling, nor mere light-heartedness. Life is not all fun--it is real and earnest, oftentimes grave and serious, sometimes solemn and tearful. "Rejoice. . . always" does not mean that one never is to have a serious thought, is always to be in some round of gaiety. This word is for the sick room and the hour of sorrow, as well as for the play room and the wedding day. It does not draw its inspiration from circumstances--it is in the heart. It is not joy which this world's favors and pleasures give--it is joy which springs from fellowship with Christ.

Another lesson in Christian living is gentleness, "Let your gentleness be evident to all." This does not mean that you are to go about telling everybody how patient, gentle and meek you are. That would be a troublesome task, and then, people might not always believe you. There is a better way of letting others know that you possess these traits. Show your gentleness in your life and conduct, in your daily interaction with men. Be patient under injury, provocation, or annoyance. Be forgiving. Show your gentleness as Christ showed his: in your speech, in the returning of love for hate, of kindness for unkindness, of love for rudeness. Such a quality in the life is like sweet perfume--you cannot hide it, and it needs no advertising. It makes itself known, if only you have it truly in your life.

Another life-lesson is never to be anxious. "Do not worry about anything." This seems rather strong counsel for ordinary mortals. It would apparently be a great deprivation to many people--if they could not worry and fret about something. A state of peaceful repose would be very wearisome and monotonous to them. Anxiety is a chronic state with too many. What a change it would bring about in the world, if every Christian would learn this lesson--in nothing to be anxious! It would add almost infinitely to the sum of human happiness, if we would eliminate this one element of misery. Worry does double work in the way of wretchedness--it makes wretched, first--the man himself who worries; then it makes his neighbors wretched.

How useless worrying is, too! It removes no trouble, lightens no burden, and softens no hardness in one's lot. On the other hand, it only makes the trial greater and the heart in its feverishness, less strong for endurance. Even philosophy, without religion, would seem to teach us to be anxious for nothing. The trouble is, however, that philosophy is more plentiful than philosophers. Everybody can tell you how not to worry--but nobody seems to live his own philosophy.

What to do with one's worries, Paul tells us also. We are to put them into God's hands--and leave them there. "In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." Take them to God, tell him all about them, and leave them with him. You are God's child; he is caring for you and also for your affairs. You have no troubles or perplexities which he does not understand, which he is not able either to remove--or to carry you through. This is the divine cure for care, and the result will be that "the peace of God. . . shall keep your hearts and minds."

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things!" Philippians 4:8. The next life-lesson the apostle teaches is contained in the wonderful cluster of "whatevers." This is one of the great ethical texts of the Bible. All of these qualities belong to a noble Christian character. Those first named are the sturdy elements--truth, honor, justice, purity; then come the more delicate and beautiful things--qualities that are winning and attractive. Some people cultivate the first

class and neglect the other. They are sturdy and just--but not lovable. We have no right to make our religion repulsive; it ought to be lovely and attractive. Then there are some who cultivate the aesthetics of religion and leave out the grand qualities of truth and uprightness. This is worse than the other omission. It takes both classes to make a full-rounded Christian character.

Paul tells us to think of these things--but thinking is not enough--he says, also, "These things. . . do." Thinking and doing are both important. Our thoughts make our character. They build it up little by little, as coral insects build up great reefs. Every thought we nourish leaves an impression, a touch--a mark of beauty or blemish. How important that we think only holy and beautiful things! That is what Paul teaches here. The things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, are what we are to think on. Thinking on false things, dishonorable things, unlovely things, makes us like those things; but pondering the noble qualities transforms us into the same nobleness.

"Beautiful thoughts--make a beautiful soul,

And a beautiful soul--makes a beautiful face."

But thinking is not enough. One only really knows--what one practices. It is not enough to raise the standard of pure and holy thoughts--we must follow the thoughts with acts; we must think right things--and then do them.

Another of the great life-lessons taught here, is contentment. "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." There may be some who study this lesson who cannot yet say this. It may be a comfort to such, to remember that Paul says he had "learned" it. He was not always so contented. It probably took him a good while to get the lesson learned, for he was quite an old man when he wrote this sentence. All lessons in life have to be learned; they do not come to us as gifts of God--but only as copies set for us, which we are to try to follow. Of course the great secret lies within the heart. If we have in us the "well of water" which Christ gives, we need not be dependent on the little springs of earthly water which go dry so often. If we have Christ--we really ought not to be greatly affected either by the possession or the loss of earthly comforts. That was Paul's secret.

The last life-lesson taught, is the ability of the Christian to do anything that God really gives him to do. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Here Paul puts the honor where it belongs. His contentment was not his own achievement. It was not the result of philosophy, was not caused by the dying out of ambition in his breast; it was because he was in Christ--that he could be content; Christ gave him strength for it, so that in whatever circumstances he was--he could quietly trust and rejoice. Christian life is full of impossibilities--things that are impossible to anyone with only human strength. But when God gives us a command--he always means to give the strength required to keep the command. It was a prayer of Augustine's, "Command what you will--and give what you command." We should never hesitate to attempt any task that God gives, for he will always give us all the strength we need!

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