

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

Prayer and Praises

Introduction

In the last study we talked about Paul's spiritual profit and loss statement. I hope that you used the days between our discussion to think about the things that God has transformed to be your profit which you once may have considered loss. Hopefully this has been a time to consider and pursue your maturity in Christ.

- *Share opportunities that you have had this last few weeks to grow in maturity in Christ. Have you been tempted to see these opportunities as a loss rather than profit?*

Read Philippians 4:1-7

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by

prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- *What stands out to you in that passage? Share your initial thoughts.*

As I read Paul's letter to the church in Philippi I find myself a little envious of those who got to be a part of a church that made such a difference in Paul's ministry. This church, we might be tempted to think, had it all going. Remember, this was the letter Paul wrote completely void of scolding or correcting - so they must have been without problems, right? Of course, reading the above passage we know that not to be the case. There was, for some unknown reason, conflict between two ladies, Euodia (yoo-OH-dih-uh) and Syntyche (SIN-tih-kee).

Keep in mind, this is not necessarily an issue of immaturity in the church. These ladies were leaders who served alongside Paul. This was not a matter of new people coming in and stirring up the dust, they had served in the church for quite some time. Leaders are not immune to conflict. Mature Christians are not invulnerable to contention. In fact, the church seems to be a soil ripe for struggle and disagreement. People in the church are passionate about what they are doing with high expectation of their church family to be passionate about the same things. And let's face it, with a church full of enthusiastic go-getters, someone is bound to get their feathers ruffled.

One thing that seems very clear is that disagreements in the church, even if they are only between a few, affect the whole church. Otherwise, why would Paul have aired this out in a letter to the whole church? But a second, and equally compelling truth is that conflict is not solved by finding the "most right" or "most wrong" in the battle. Note what Paul did not do that we are often tempted to do: He did not take sides. He did not assign blame. He did not lift one above the other or put either down. In fact, he did just the opposite. He lifted them both up as ministers of the gospel and influences in his ministry. He didn't want one to be declared the winner - but he wanted both to be reconciled to each other.

- *Suppose it was you who Paul called on to help these two individuals resolve their disagreements. How would you go about doing so?*
- *Can you think of agreements that exist in the church today? Without breaking confidences or gossiping with specifics, what can you do to be the mediator?*
- *If you are a part of the conflict, what can you do to seek to "be of the same mind in the Lord" - as urged in verse two?*

I have read and been quoted verse 4 in a myriad of circumstances. It is eye-opening to read it in the context of conflict going on around us. No matter what is going on, no matter how frustrating or painful the circumstances seem, no matter how beyond our reach of control the actions of others are - we need to rejoice. Seeking to be gentle and not anxious, we need to understand that God is in control.

- *How often do you take these kinds of issues to God in prayer before you try to solve them?*
- *How would Valley Ministries look different if your (you individually) primary goal was not to blame, but to offer gentleness and prayer? Or would it look different at all?*

Read Philippians 4:8-13

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through God who gives me strength.

I have often said that Philippians is my favorite book in the Bible. The theme of joy and the amazing perspective of Paul brings incredible hope to the darkest of times. It is like traveling with someone who has made the journey many times and no matter how dark the night or deep the storm - that person will guide you through. And in the midst of his storm Paul presents, in these few verses, the secret ingredient to his unbeatable recipe for joy. Take control of your mind. Don't be a victim to your circumstances or to your focus, but take control and determine what you will focus on regardless of your circumstances. We have all met people who refuse to see the good in things - it is either too hot or too cold, too sunny or too overcast, too dry or too muggy, too many people or too small a crowd, too loud or too boring.

- *What if we, as Christian believer who subscribe to the all-knowing will of God, refused to see the bad in things?*
- *What if we were, by default, thankful?*

- *Do you think this type of attitude would change your perspective about situations or people you meet?*

I have made it a point, in the last few months, when I find myself beginning a conversation of criticism or judgement in my head about the strangers I pass on the street, to audibly thank God for those individual people. I will likely never see most of them again. I am quite confident that we won't be having conversation or that these strangers even recognize that I'm a living breathing soul in the car next to them - but I have noticed that, when I thank God for them and all that they have to give to this world, it changes my perspective. They are no longer a bad driver, or a punk kid who can't pull his pants up, or a right-wing fanatic out to get me - but they are creations of the God who created me. There is a connectedness and it has nothing to do with me, it is about our mutual creator.

In a like manner, we can do the same thing in all circumstances. Amy Grant once sang in her song, "How Can We See that Far?" lyrics that are a perfect example of the spectrum of perspectives:

The same sun that melts the wax can harden clay
 And the same rain that drowns the rat will grow the hay
 And the mighty wind that knocks us down
 If we lean into it will drive our fears away.

- *Pessimism, often given the nickname (even though they are not the same) realism, is such a hard habit to break. How can we define our life by looking at the things worthy of praise and virtue?*
- *What is the difference between blindly ignoring our challenges and seeing God's joyous perspectives through them?*

Read Philippians 4:14-23

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of God's glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰ To our God and creator be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²¹ Greet all God's people in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters who are with me send greetings. ²² All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Just as he began his letter putting his joyous perspectives into practice, Paul ends his letter the same way. Thanking God for the gifts of this amazing church and reminding them that they were a part of the ministry he has had and continues to have.

- *Take some moments, in the closing moments of this session, to share anything that has encouraged you. Specifically, let each other know ways that their words, prayers, or presence has been a part of your growth or a source of strength in your journey.*

As we conclude our study on Philippians, make it a point to take charge of your focus. Choose to think on the things of God and know that God will meet all your needs according to the riches of God's amazing glory through Christ.

Amen!