



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Blessing of Shalom

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ OCTOBER 15, 2017

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 every situation, 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.

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 him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:4-13 (NIV)

This is one of those passages which illustrates to us that Christians, the disciples of Jesus, have a very different way of viewing life and of viewing the world than what is common to the fallen man. Jesus describes it as being “born again.” When we are transformed from the inside out, our perspective radically changes. What we value, our hopes and dreams, our attitudes, our response to situations and challenges, the way we deal with other people, are all different. Yes indeed, the Christian faith does have a direct impact on how we live our lives. Without that transformation however, Paul’s words do not make any sense. People read this passage and are confused about how it is possible.

This passage includes one of the most often quoted (and often misused) passages of Scripture. Sometimes this passage gets plastered on locker room walls or in offices as a Christian motivational mantra for success. It is, of course, Philippians 4:13. The most literal translation of what Paul wrote is, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

“All things” means **all** things, right? When I was a kid growing up in St. Louis, I had the same childlike ambition that most little boys my age had. If I just worked hard enough, someday I would grow up and be able to pitch for the St. Louis Cardinals just like Bob Gibson! More apropos for me, especially, was that if I just worked hard enough, I would someday be able to be a concert violinist like Itzhak Perlman! Well, let me tell you something. That just was not going to happen! Now I was a good ballplayer, but I did not have that kind of skill. I had athletic limitations as well as limitations in my size. And although I did work very, very hard at my music and had some talent for the violin, it was not **that** kind of talent! Not to mention some of the harebrained ideas I have had as an adult! My dear wife, with all her love and patience and understanding, would say to me, “What! Are you out of your mind? Are you crazy? You aren’t going to do that! What’s the matter with you?” Wives are very good for helping us to keep our feet firmly planted on the ground of reality.

Is Paul wrong? Is he merely giving us a pie-in-the-sky approach to living? What are the “things” he is talking about? “I can do **all things**.” The NIV translation, which I just read for you this morning, helps us here. The NIV translators help us to look toward the context in which Paul is giving this line: “I can do all **this** through him who gives me strength.” So whatever “this” is—that is the question. What is he referring to when he says, “all this”? Well, consider Paul’s situation. When he is writing this letter to the Philippians he is once again imprisoned, and he is thanking the Philippians for their desire to help him. Here is what he says in verses 10-11 about that.

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.**

Content? Whatever the circumstances? Paul is in prison! He is suffering privation! He is about to journey on the final challenge of his life that will lead to his martyrdom. Yet he says, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstance.” The “this” that he is talking about is whatever it is that God calls us to face at different times in our life, He enables us to do so. This passage is not necessarily about what **we** set out to do driven by our own desires, but rather what God **calls** us to do. Notice that this is not only about accomplishing things, it is about being content **regardless of circumstances**. We must ask, “How can Paul come to such a place in his life?” I suspect all of us wish that we could capture that sense of contentment regardless of our own circumstances. But notice he says, “I have **learned** to be content.” This tells us that this contentment is not an emotion, it is not a feeling, it does not just happen because of external circumstances. It is a choice. It is a decision that we make. It is something that we, at some point, must do. The question, of course, is on what basis do we make that decision? How can I come to a place like Paul and say, “You know what? Regardless of circumstances, I am content.”

I think sometimes people confuse contentment with happiness. So many people tell me that being happy is their goal, "I want everybody else to be happy; I want to be happy. Isn't that the goal of everyone?" The problem with happiness is that it is so fleeting. Happiness is the result of how we choose to react to external circumstances. This makes me happy. That does not make me happy. This music brings me happiness. This...whatever it is...really makes me sad. Moods can change instantly. One moment we are happy and in a good mood and are having a good time, and then somebody says something, or something happens and instantly we are no longer happy. We spend so much time in life trying to control external circumstances and trying to control the world around us so that we will be happy. We have this never-ending quest to be happy. The simple fact of the matter is that we cannot do it! It is a delusion; we cannot control the world around us. Perhaps we can for a time or in certain situations, but there is so much frustration and unrest because we are trying to control something that is uncontrollable, and we are depending on the uncontrollable to make us happy.

We often make this mistake in relationships. We expect that the other person is going to make us happy. There is not a person on the planet who will consistently make us happy 24/7! It just is not going to happen! We can hold it against that person, but they cannot control how we are going to respond to whatever it is that they are doing or whatever the circumstances of our life are. They have no control over that. What they are called to do is to love us, and how we choose to respond is up to us; they cannot control it.

For example, there may come a day when my son will come to me and say, "Dad, I'm going to have to take the car keys from you." That is not going to make me happy! However, you can be sure that he is doing it because he loves me. That is what we are called to do. What Paul is talking about is so much more than just being happy. It is more comprehensive and all-encompassing; it is more of a state of being.

There is an example of a college student who was talking with her advisor during lunch in the college refectory. She was reiterating

once again that she hated her life and she hated herself. She was going on about how worthless she was and how she hated everything about herself. The prof finally said, "You know, I couldn't help but notice a few moments ago when you were over at the salad bar, that you very carefully picked the very best of everything that was there. You picked through the tomatoes carefully to make sure you chose the best ones, and you picked the best lettuce. Why did you pick the best if you hated yourself so much? The fact of the matter is you **do** love yourself and you want the best for yourself. Perhaps the problem is that you love yourself too much." And she said, "What do you mean?" He answered, "Because you have a vision in your mind of what you think you're entitled to and the fact that you are not getting it is leading you to this frustration."

You see, when we do not get what we think we should have, we get very frustrated in both little things and big things. We do not know how to be content. What the prof was trying to get across was not to negate ambition or goal setting; what he was trying to tap into is that when we are in the process of pursuing those goals, where is our heart? If we never reach those goals, where is our heart? If we come up against unanticipated challenges, where is our heart?

In Paul's case, he certainly would have preferred not to be persecuted. It is not that he sought persecution deliberately. If persecution comes, we accept it, but we do not go looking for it. There can be the sin of pride even in that. If God calls us to face something, we face it. But what Paul was tapping into, my friends, is this whole concept of *shalom*.

Ordinarily, when we hear this word *shalom*, what do we mean? How is it usually translated? Most often people translate *shalom* to mean peace, and it does mean that. When Jesus came into the upper room after His Resurrection and greeted the disciples, the English translation of what He said is, "Peace be with you." What He was saying was, "*Shalom*." Perhaps you have noticed that *shalom* is used both as a greeting to someone and as a parting word. In that context, what is meant by this well wish or benediction is, "May God

bless you with every good thing.” Sometimes people think peace, or *shalom*, means the absence of conflict. Paul is using this word peace, or *shalom*, in a much more complete way. True *shalom* is “the spiritual state where there is inner tranquility that transcends and is not dependent upon external circumstances.” Let me say that again, “True *shalom* is inner tranquility that transcends and is not dependent on external circumstances.” This is the peace, or the *shalom*, that only Christ can give. This is what Paul meant. Look at verses 12 -13 to see what he says next.

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, I can do all **this** through him who gives me strength.

How? How can Paul do this? But more importantly, how can we do this? Let’s go back to the beginning of the passage; it is reflected in the hymn that we sang, Come People of the Risen King. Did you notice the refrain? We kept saying, “Rejoice, rejoice!” In verse 4 Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” I used to read that passage and I would think, “Paul, are you daft? You rejoice in the Lord always? I’m supposed to rejoice during Hurricane Irma? I’m supposed to rejoice when the stock market crashes? I’m supposed to rejoice when I have just been diagnosed with a serious illness? Paul, what are you talking about? Always?” He says, “I will say it again: Rejoice!” Yes, he definitely means it. He is absolutely serious; in all circumstances, rejoice. Why do we rejoice and how can we rejoice in all circumstances?

A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon on God’s Providence, and we saw how God works out His purpose through all of the experiences of our life. Even if we cannot see it, God is always working out His purpose through our life. And since we know that God is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful—that He is gracious and merciful—we can know, as Paul says in Romans 8:28, that “in all things God works for good.” Notice he does not say that all things **are** good. He says that He works **through** all things for good—not just a few

anointed good things—but the good, the bad, and the ugly. In all the experiences of our life God is working out His purpose.

In the next verse you find out what the good is: that He uses all of our experiences to help us become more like Christ. We know that no matter what it is we are going through and no matter what we are experiencing, somehow, even though we cannot see it, God is working out His perfect purpose. We know that our lives are in the palm of His hand, and when we embrace this truth with faith, it prevents us from descending into despair and bitterness and hopelessness, fear and anxiety, and unforgiveness.

Think of it this way (this is not the best example, but I think you will get the point). Going back to Bob Gibson and the baseball games: Suppose you are rooting for your team to win. Now, if you knew absolutely for certain that your team was going to win (how would you ever know that?), and even if in the middle of the game your team is losing 8-0, you are still going to rejoice because you know how the game will end. Otherwise, if you do not know how it is going to end and they are losing 8-0, you get very upset! Your team is not hitting, nothing is going right, you paid \$100 for the ticket, and they are losing so badly! No wonder you are so anxious! On the other hand, if you knew how the game was going to end, losing 8-0 in the middle of the game is nothing! You are rejoicing. You see, this is what faith does because of Who God is! He is all-knowing, all-powerful, all loving, and as the Scripture teaches, He is always working out His purpose.

We know that God is victorious in all things, and though we will experience the full range of emotions—we will be happy, we will be sad, we will be disappointed, we will be encouraged—all these emotions happen, but at the core of our soul there is *shalom*: there is that inner tranquility, that peace, that cannot be shaken.

Let's look at the fruit of that trust, that faith, that confidence in God's Providence, the results of that rejoicing. If we live a life of rejoicing, what happens? Next, Paul says that the testimony of that in-

ner tranquility is that it manifests itself in natural gentleness. When our soul is at rest, when we are calm, when our soul is confident in the Lord, there is no need for aggression, for impatience, for rudeness, for insults or vengeance. There is no need for resentments, jealousy, prejudice, a lack of forgiveness, or a less than generous spirit. Look what Paul says in verse 5, “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”

You see, when the Lord is near, you can trust that He is in control. You can afford to be gentle toward others. When you are confident and calm, there is room for others in your heart because we are sure that the Lord is near. Paul then addresses the question of anxiety. We all experience anxiety, look what he says in verse 6, “Do not be anxious about anything...” You might think that Paul is really stretching this. It was bad enough that he said to rejoice in all circumstances and be content! Now he says not to be anxious? How can you not? Here is how: “...in every situation, by prayer and petition...” You come to God with whatever it is, you bring your petition and, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. This is reminiscent of what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 where He says not to worry about anything and to look at the birds as an example. He is saying that the Almighty Creator of the universe, the One who is all-powerful and all-magnificent is so intimately involved in His creation that He even makes sure that birds have something to eat. He makes sure that all things in creation, from the littlest flower, is a perfect work of art. God, who is so intimately involved in His creation, will be with you—you, who are so much more valuable than all else—and that He will walk the road with you throughout your life and sustain you through every challenge.

So we pour out our hearts to God in prayer, but we do it with thanksgiving because we already know that God is going to do something wonderful with our prayers. First, Scripture teaches that He already knows what we are going to pray before we even pray it. The act of prayer is our discipline in turning things over to Him. Since He is the very definition of goodness, we know that He will do

what is best for all. Of course, we are going to be thankful! Can you see the kind of life that Paul is lifting up here?

Remember when Jesus raised Lazarus? He was standing in front of the tomb, and before He performed that miracle, He prayed. The first thing He said was, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” Nothing had happened yet. Most of us say that seeing is believing, right? But, faith is trusting in that which we can not see. So before anything happened, before Lazarus came out of that tomb, the first thing that Jesus said was, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” That is the assumption; and He said that he wasn’t saying this for himself, he was saying it for all the people who were witnessing this. He was giving them an example. Then, Jesus performed the miracle.

We can trust all that God does! Instead of being full of fear, we live a life of thanksgiving, gratitude, and hope, not because we trust what **we** can do or what **others** can do in all circumstances, but because we trust Him. As a result of that trust—and He is worthy of that trust—there is *shalom*. It follows that in a life of rejoicing, a life of gentleness, a life without anxiety, a life of thanksgiving—isn’t that the life you would love to have? —there is *shalom*. Look at verse 7: “And the peace of God...” (the *shalom* of God) “which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” “Transcends understanding...” People do not understand this. And why? It is because they do not know Him! Without a knowledge of Jesus Christ, this is all pie-in-the-sky nonsense. But, when we know Jesus intimately, this is a living reality.

Some Christians hold a faith in Jesus as a matter of their opinion, which is a good first step. They might say, “Yes, I accept that Jesus went to the cross for me and died for me and so forth...” But, they do not **know** Him. It is more than understanding, it is a profound depth of relationship with the One who loves you more than anyone else does or ever could. It is an unshakable confidence in the One who is the Lord of all and the Source of all goodness. When He is at the center of your life that is where true *shalom* will manifest itself.

Christ's peace and His *shalom*, will guard your hearts and minds. This means that He will guard your heart against the things that you otherwise would default to, such as bitterness, anger, hatefulness, destructive habits, rash decisions, and unbiblical attitudes.

Paul helps us to see that *shalom* is elusive, that sometimes we get in our own way. Have you ever found yourself obsessing over something troublesome; something you just cannot get out of your mind? In verses 8-9, Paul gives you a whole list of things: "whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...think about such things." Give due attention to troublesome things as necessary, but when we choose to hold onto those things we then wonder why there is so much anxiety in our hearts. It is because we obsess over those things that drag us down instead of keeping our eyes firmly on Christ and focusing on things that will build us up. So Paul says to observe him! He is not doing this out of arrogance, but so that we can see in him that what he is telling us is real and it will happen for us. Paul is living proof.

This tells us, my friends, that you must choose your role models either from the Bible or from history. A dear friend and colleague of mine made this point and I wondered why we could not choose from people alive today. Why not have a role model from the modern time? And he said, "Because you don't know how their life is going to end up. You don't know the end of the story." There was once a man who was lifted up by two different Presidents of the United States. It was said that this was a man to emulate. Later in his life, this man took most of his congregation to South America, and they all drank poison and committed mass suicide. His name was Jim Jones.

Paul, on the other hand, is worthy of emulating because he was an unshakable disciple of Jesus Christ and for nothing else or no one else. In his heart, facing death, facing prison, facing privations, he had *shalom*. All he could think about and write about in that letter to the Philippians was joy, blessing, thanksgiving, praise. This is authentic. This is not an act.

My friends, consistent lifelong inner tranquility is so elusive to so many because they are looking for it in the wrong places and for the wrong reasons. A transformed, born-again disciple always looks toward Jesus, and He is where we find peace that transcends all understanding. *Shalom*. May the peace of God be with you. Amen.



BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org