

Christ is the Secret

DUANE KELDERMAN

Have you ever been struck by the fact that how people feel about life has very little to do with how their life is actually going? You would think people who have more money, better jobs, healthier kids, would be happier and more positive than people who are poor, have hard jobs, and struggle with health; but it is just not true. If happiness and joy do not come from our circumstances, where do they come from? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

So Duane, we are now at the end of our little four-part series on the book of Philippians, and we have kind of opened up this whole beautiful letter by talking about the theme of the Christ-centered life. Last week in particular, in Chapter 3, we saw how Paul said his whole life now is revolving around knowing Christ and being found in him.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And now in Chapter 4, he talks about what that life looks like; and I think that Philippians 4:4-7 are probably the favorite verses of so many Christian believers. Paul says:

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.

DAVE BAST

Yes, justly famous words; much loved by Christians. I think it is important at the outset to point out that when Paul counsels the Philippians to rejoice always, to be anxious about nothing, he is not some ivory tower theologian or philosopher. There is a line in Shakespeare that says: There never yet was a philosopher that could endure the toothache patiently. In other words, all of our theories about joy and no anxiety and all the rest kind of come tumbling to the ground as soon as something goes wrong or we experience pain ourselves; but Paul is writing this from prison. He is on trial for his life. He is living in very uncertain circumstances. He does not know where the money for next month's rent or food is going to come from. He does not even know if he will be alive to eat that food. So, he is not an ivory tower philosopher. He is living in tough circumstances, and this is his counsel: Do not be anxious, but rejoice.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes, and rejoice, even with all of those circumstances that were so difficult, he still has the courage to say: Rejoice as a command. It is a command for us to do. And I think it is important to make a couple of distinctions here between Christian joy, and pleasure, for example, or happiness. It has always been very interesting to me that there is just one Greek word that lies behind four really important New Testament

concepts. The Greek word *chara* is the root word for grace – *charis* – gift, charisma, joy – *chara* – and thanksgiving – *eucharist*. God’s grace, God’s gifts, our joy, our thanksgiving – these are all of one piece with one another. Joy is the overflow, really, of our rich life in Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes. There is some substance there. One Gospel song says: I sing because I’m happy. Well, I don’t, because we are not always happy. I don’t think Paul, as you say, is talking about a concept like happiness or everything is great; nor is he sort of saying this is a kind of mental exercise whereby we blot out all the negative and just focus on happy thoughts. It is sort of like that wonderful song in the *Sound of Music*, you know, My Favorite Things – when the dog bites, when the bee stings, I simply remember my favorite things and then I don’t feel so bad. That is not what he is talking about when he is introducing the concept of genuine, authentic Christian joy.

DUANE KELDERMAN

At the same time, he is making it very clear that we face a choice – a decision – about where we will focus; and I find Philippians 4:4-13 to be some of the most empowering verses in all of scripture because they make so clear that we make the decision as to whether we will focus upon that for which we are thankful or whether we will focus upon the things that we do not have.

DAVE BAST

Well, you said that joy is an out-flowing or an overflowing of our life in Christ. I also think it is important to put this all in the perspective that Paul does. He says: Remember the Lord is near; or it could be translated: The Lord is at hand – very interesting phrase. So, is he suggesting the idea that Christ is with us – that God is with us? He lives in our hearts, in our lives; he is always very close to us; in whatever circumstances we are in, we have that intimacy with him; or is he reminding us about the future that is promised in the New Testament? The Lord is at hand, meaning he is on the verge of coming back, and when he returns the creation will be renewed and we will be raised. We will experience the life of the kingdom – the life of the world to come. There is that double sense there, and I do not think we can rejoice always – that makes no sense apart from the world to come.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and when he says, “Let your gentleness be evident to all; the Lord is near,” – the point you are making – I think Paul is saying: Put things in the big picture. It is easy in the moment to get very upset about something; to not be very gentle; and then an hour later, or even a minute later, we realize that in the big picture that really was not worth getting so upset about...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And Paul is saying we have to also really crank that lens back and look at the big, big, big picture of life, including even the life to come, and say: Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

DAVE BAST

Yes. You know, we are sometimes criticized – we are often criticized by unbelievers for talking about heaven or for talking about the new creation; and, come on, what are you doing? That is escapist. That is a cop out. You are just... But no, I am sorry. Excuse me. If there is no future eternity, then nothing here matters – then saying “rejoice” is crazy because we are locked into suffering, loss, and death; and the best you can do is to try to distract yourself by thinking about a few of your favorite things when things are going badly; but if heaven is real – if God has a future for each of us – then the worst that we experience here we can put into that bigger picture – that bigger perspective of God is working out his purpose. God is saving us. God will work this somehow, ultimately, to our eternal benefit.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. In that next phrase Paul says, “Present your requests to God,” and then he says, “with thanksgiving.” I think a good example that many people can identify with is: You maybe lost your job and you present your request to God that I will get a new job – that I will find another job; but most people who have this perspective of joy, of abundance of life in Christ, will be able to see all kinds of ways in which God has been good to them, even in the situation of losing their job – see ways that God has provided for them. They still have food to eat; they still have a roof over their heads; they have had surprising gestures of generosity. We can always find things for which to be thankful, and that is the frame in which we present our requests to God.

DAVE BAST

Right; so Paul begins by telling us some things to do – to rejoice, to give thanks, to remember the Lord’s nearness, to present our prayers about the things that maybe could make us anxious – to present them with thanksgiving; but next he is going to go on in Chapter 4 to tell us what to think about, and we will look at that in a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, along with Duane Kelderman, and today we are digging into Philippians Chapter 4. We have been talking about Paul’s wonderful opening words about anxiety and prayer and rejoicing, and now we come to verse 8, where he tells us something about our thought process as Christians. He writes:

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. So here is the issue of mental attitude.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and where we focus. These verses reminded me of a cottage in northern Michigan, and I had two different conversations. In my first conversation with Bill and Mary we will call them...

DAVE BAST

Not their real names, I trust.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Oh, no. No. They were reveling in the beauty of the day. It was about 87 degrees and sunny, low humidity, a perfect Michigan day. We talked about how great Michigan summers are; about the privilege of having a cottage; we were grateful for how our kids were doing. It was a very positive, upbeat conversation laced with gratitude. The second conversation, on the same walk, could not have been more different. Joe and Diane, we will call them, were upset about everything; from boats coming too close to the docks, to these kids of ours, to how can we make any money in this economy, to when is the government going to start doing this or quit doing this. Try as I wanted, I could not get that conversation out of the mud – total negativity. Paul says today in verses 8 and 9 that we choose – each one of us chooses where we will focus in our lives. Joe and Diane are perfectly miserable people, and it is not because of their circumstances. Their external circumstances are actually better than Bill and Mary’s external circumstances. They choose upon which they will focus.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes. Isn’t that the truth? Boy, it really does not matter how much money you have, how happy you are. I know we say that, and sometimes people think: Oh, come on; give me a break. But I think of King Ahab in the Bible – one of the great stories from the book of Kings. Ahab is in his palace and he looks over the wall and he sees this little vineyard that Naboth owns, and he is just utterly miserable because he cannot have that, too. It is never enough. There is always something else. If your heart is filled and focused on the wrong kinds

of things, you are never going to be happy.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And those words: Whatever is true, noble, right – those are such uplifting words. Dale Carnegie actually said once...

DAVE BAST

The great theologian, Dale Carnegie... *How to Win Friends and Influence People...*

DUANE KELDERMAN

In that book he actually says something that is really the point that Paul is making here about where we focus. He said: It is not what you have or who you are or where you are or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about.

DAVE BAST

There is a practical side to this. We talked earlier, in Chapter 3, about the righteousness that is ours through Christ, and it is only by faith, and we forget all the rest and we focus on him. We want to be found in him. We want to know him. That is the core and heart of our faith; but Paul also says in Philippians, as we have noted another verse, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you.” So, there is something about our own efforts, including our mental efforts, that will help shape our salvation and our experience of it at the very least. We can go way too far the other way and just say: Oh, it is all faith. It does not matter what you do. You just lay back and God does it all. No; we are called to do and think certain things, and Paul is emphasizing that right here in this very practical passage.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly; and I think a very practical thing that we can do is do an audit of our own speech – of our own words. How many words that I utter in a day are of this uplifting nature, focusing on what is true and noble and right, versus how many words in a given day that I utter are really focusing upon things that are negative, things that are not true or noble or right?

DAVE BAST

Or do an audit on your media consumption. What books do you read? What magazines do you look at? What websites do you visit? Because we are feeding our imagination continuously, and Paul is very specific here; if we focus on things that are good and wholesome and right, it will be well with us; but as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, if your eye offends you, you had better cut it out. If you are looking at the wrong stuff, it is going to hurt you – possibly even destroy you; so, this is very basic and very important.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And Paul says there are two different things here: One is what do we think about, and the other one is: What do we do? What practices do we develop? He goes on to say that whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, put it into practice. Paul understood the importance of Christians developing certain Christian practices. There is actually a new book out right now entitled *The Power of Habit*. It is a fascinating book that looks at how we are creatures of habit and how powerful habits can be, and it is easy to focus upon negative habits, but it is equally true of positive habits; and when Paul says put it into practice, in contemporary language, or in the language of that book, he is really saying: Be intentional about developing positive habits in your life.

Here is a simple example of a habit. I was convicted of this years ago. Someone said: Think about when you get home from work. What is the very first thing that you say to your spouse or to someone else who is at your house? Is the very first thing you go to what was most difficult about your day; what was most stressful; what drove you crazy? Or do you make the very first thing that you say when you go home from work to talk about something that was good in that day; something that you are thankful for; something that went well? That is a simple but powerful example of where we choose – we choose what we will focus upon – and we choose what we will do – what we will practice.

DAVE BAST

And that little habit will set the tenor, probably, for the whole evening – maybe the dinner hour. Paul is talking here about contentment: I have learned to be content – another famous verse – and we will look at that to wrap up the program.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*; I am Dave Bast.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And we are focusing in this last of a series on Paul's letter to the Philippians on Philippians Chapter 4. We have worked through all of these wonderful, and many of them familiar verses, and we come finally to another beautiful statement at the end. Paul has been talking to the Philippians, and he thanks them for the gift that they have sent – the financial help that supported him in his imprisonment in Rome – and then he says: I want you to know, though, that I have learned in whatever condition or state that I am, to be content in every situation; whether I am well fed or hungry, whether I am in plenty or in want, I can do all things through him, that is Christ, who strengthens me. Fabulous; I have learned to be content.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And notice again how Paul is saying that his perspective comes not from those circumstances outside of himself, but from within. He chooses to be content because of what, because of his bank account? No. He chooses to be content, and he has contentment, because of who he is in Christ.

DAVE BAST

You know, you were talking earlier, Duane, about the importance of habit, and we looked at how important it is – what we focus on in our lives. I remember reading some years back a sermon on this text, I have learned to be content, that spelled out five basic rules for how to achieve contentment. Notice Paul says: I learned it. It does not come naturally. What comes naturally, I suppose, to most of us is complaining or criticizing or being dissatisfied or unhappy; but we can learn contentment by developing the right kind of habits as Christians – habits of faith. Let me throw them out and you react to them. Rule number one is do not complain about anything, not even the weather.

DUANE KELDERMAN

That is Philippians 4.

DAVE BAST

There are chronic grumblers, aren't there?

DUANE KELDERMAN

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

And there is a constant tendency to say: This is wrong. The story you told earlier about the couple – all they could do was complain. So, steel yourself – do not complain.

Here is rule two: Stop fantasizing, is how I would put it. Do not picture yourself in circumstances that you aren't, and are not likely to be. Have you ever noticed those billboards advertising the lottery that seem to be sprouting up all over the place beside the highway? They blare out this incredible number of \$212,000,000.00. What do you do? You start to fantasize: Wow, what if I had that?

DUANE KELDERMAN

There is one person who said: Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not.

DAVE BAST

Yes; there you go. So, you want to be content? Focus on what God has given you.

Here is rule three: Do not compare your life to your neighbor's – to somebody else's – because God... if we are Christians, we believe God has put us in the place where we are and given us the gifts that we have. So, if we are constantly saying: Why am I not like that, or why did she get that and I have this, it is going to lead to discontent.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And Dave, that one is so hard for us to do in North American culture because advertisers know that the way they can get us motivated to spend money on their products is by comparison. You should have a car like your neighbor has. You should have a diamond ring like she has.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. Here is rule four: Do not dwell on the past. You know, the past is over and done. There is nothing we can do about it. We may be bearing some of the scars of the past; we may be carrying a burden; but that is another one of those things that we have to say: Do not be anxious.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Forgetting what lies behind.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. You have to turn that over to God, and give it up, because we are living in the present. Our guilt is covered as Christians. We can be forgiven the past and we can even overcome it.

Here is the final rule, which is sort of the flipside. Do not worry about tomorrow.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Do not let the past or the future paralyze you.

DAVE BAST

I have a Bible, if I can get a little personal here and tell a story. It is an old King James Bible. My father gave it to my mother almost sixty years ago when she went into the hospital with a diagnosis of cancer; and on the flyleaf of the Bible he wrote a quotation from John Wesley: My Master hath forbade me to take thought for the morrow; of course, picking up on Jesus' words: Don't worry about tomorrow, or take no thought for tomorrow, in the old King James. I have kept that Bible now, all these many years after her death just as a reminder that God calls us to serve him today. God calls us to obey him today – to do all these things today – not worrying about either yesterday or tomorrow – and that is how we move forward in following Christ.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And Paul's message about contentment today is so countercultural. We talk about how the Christian faith is countercultural. Our culture does not want us to be content. Our economy – and our economy is not just the North American economy – the world economy today will not survive if people are content. We succeed as an economy by actually making people not content; and yet, the secret of contentment is one of the great secrets of the Christian life.

DAVE BAST

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And again, yes. We find the secret – we find that source of contentment, not in just mental adjustment, but we find that source of contentment in who we now know ourselves to be in Christ; Paul’s message in the book of Philippians.

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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