

## Beyond Ghosting God (A Sermon on Prayer)" | Philippians 4:2-9

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### Introduction

In 1989, 16-year old Tim Carleton and his friend Darrick Deel, were “Yanni-loving computer nerd[s], messing around with a drum machine and synthesizer[s]” in their parents’ garage in California.

They wrote a now famous (or infamous) song, depending who you ask. The tune was lost in the vault, forgotten for many years until Tim went to work for a little start up in Silicon Valley, a telecommunications company called Cisco. At that time, the company was searching for “hold music” for its phones, Tim offered his old synth composition, and it was accepted. Cisco quickly adopted it as the official “hold” music.

Now known as “Opus #1”, the composition has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon, gathering hundreds of millions of streams online. My guess is that all of us have, at one time or another, been grumpily “on hold” to it. Grumpy that is, until we fall victim to its hypnotic groove. You know the one.

*[Viciously catchy staggered drum beat followed by wicked synth emulation]*

So often, when we think of prayer, it can sort of feel like we’re “on hold” with heaven, swaying to the sovereign groove of the staggered snare drum of Opus #1, waiting for our requests to be answered. Right when we think we’re about to make progress, the line starts ringing. “Finally. I’m about to get through!”

It turns out to be the equivalent of almighty Alexa or a sanctified Siri: “Your supplications are important to us. All lines to the almighty are currently occupied. We look forward to granting your request at some point in eternity future.”

Regardless of what we think of prayer, the mystery around it, or the questions we have about it. One thing is for certain: it is an essential spiritual practice according to the Bible.

Jesus himself prays. Jesus calls us to pray, and assumes that we will pray. Jesus even teaches us *how* to pray. But what it begs the question: **what is prayer?** And what effect (if any) does it have on our lives here and now—even as we wait for our prayers to be answered? Most of us suspect that prayer is meant to be more than simply the occasional *ad hoc* petition, hurled up to what amounts to be a genie God way up in the sky while we endlessly wait on hold to Opus #1.

In today’s sermon in our January series, *Disciplines of Disciples*, we’re going to focus on prayer. In particular, we’ll look at how prayer results in a peace. A peace that Paul says “surpasses understanding.” A present peace. A peace within, with our neighbors, and with God. We’ll look

at the passage in two parts: first we'll look at how **rejoicing that leads to reasonableness and unity** in the midst of disputes and disagreements (vv. 2-5) and then at how **prayer that leads to peace** (vv. 6-7).

## I. Reasonableness through Rejoicing (Phil. 4:2-5)

### Ia. "Agree in the Lord"

The passage starts off with Paul making a plea to his co-workers in Philippi:

- "I entreat Euodia and Syntyche **to agree** in the Lord."
- *Lit.* "to think the same thing."

We see this emphasis earlier in the epistle too

- **Phil. 1:27** — "standing firm in one spirit, **with one mind** striving side by side for the faith of the gospel"
- **Phil. 2:2** — "complete my joy by being **of the same mind**, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

### Ib. "Written in the Book of Life"

- We do not know anything about the nature of the disagreement. We can infer that it wasn't some heretical doctrinal disagreement. Paul describes them as co-laborers in the gospel whose "names are written in the book of life."
- When Paul wants to call out serious ethical or doctrinal error he does so very directly. In 1 Tim 1:19-20, Paul says that Hymenaeus and Alexander "made a *shipwreck* of their faith." Then he says he has handed them over to Satan, so that they might learn not to blaspheme. That's not the case here in Philippians.
- It could have been a difference of ministry style, or personality. It might have been a disagreement over a non-essential issue
  - like we might differ over what baptism means, or spiritual gifts.
  - Maybe Euodia was a Calvinist and Syntyche an Arminian.
  - One liked Hillsong and the other insisted on only singing hymns.
  - One loved the NIV Bible translation and the other would scoff 'NIV . . . the not inspired version.'

Whatever it was; it was a *non-essential issue*, but that didn't make it a *non-issue*.

Most of our everyday disagreements are battles based on **preferences** and **personalities**. Small though they may seem, they can and do splinter relationships, split churches, and certainly steal our joy.

### Ic. Reasonableness through Rejoicing

Paul gives us an example here of how conflict can be addressed as Christians.

- He **doesn't shame or bully** his co-workers in the gospel into a rigid, forced uniformity. One interpreter quoted some old cultural proverbs:

"We must *howl* like wolves when among wolves"

"Those who act like sheep will quickly be devoured by wolves."

- We sometimes feel like the way we should deal conflict in a world full of wolves is to **adopt the way of the wolf**. Devour or be devoured. But as Christians we're not called to be **workday wolves** and **weekend sheep**. We're called to be sheep among wolves.

A sheep who puts on wolves clothing during the work week is likely to actually become a wolf. The bewitching power of sin is too strong to don as an only occasional accessory.

- **Neither does he bury the issue**, bottling it up, creating a breeding ground for bigger problems under the bursting pressure of **unresolved conflict** and **pent up passive-aggression**.

Paul does not endorse the dreaded "insult by ellipsis." The ultimate passive-aggressive pout expressed through punctuation.

"I was thinking we can just go swimming at the pool at my place rather than drive all the way to the beach."

"Sure. If that's what you want to do, I'm good with it, I guess . . ."

+ Paul calls the Philippians not to wolf-like aggression or punctuation passive aggression but to open and courteous agreement "in the Lord."

He doesn't call us to this difficult task without the requisite resources to see the situation through to a place of reconciliation and peace. Paul points us to Christ as the solution.

Verse 4 — "Rejoice **in the Lord**, always."

Verse 5a — "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone."

Verse 5b — "The Lord is near."

As if the exhortation to a reasonable response is surrounded by and empowered by the presence of God and the praise of God.

Paul instructs us **to rejoice our way to reasonableness**.

You might not think of "rejoicing" as a form of prayer, but it is. The word means "to be glad" and in this case "to be glad *in the Lord*." It's worth noting that prayer is so much more than our petitions. Many of the Psalms simply praise God for who he is *as God*. One of the ways that we

become reasonable people is by focusing on God first and foremost—not our frustrations or our circumstances.

Rejoicing is a form of prayer as proactive praise. Framing all our interactions first with adoration of God. Prayer is powerful when it comes in the form of rejoicing and praise. It not only glorifies God; it shapes us and our communities.

[*Transition*] The principle is this: **we cannot expect to rightly relate to others if we are not first rightly relating to God.** Without Christ the only variables we have to work with are sin and sin, and the only possible outcome is more sin. Rejoicing is the road to godly reasonableness; and (as we will see in verses 6-7), prayer is the path to God’s peace.

## II. Peace through Prayer (Phil. 4:6-7)

Notice the sequence of thought in verses 6-7.

...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Prayer *results in* peace.

This peace “surpasses all understanding.” It is a counter-intuitive peace. **We wouldn’t default to this peace** on our own. We’d instead lean into the learned patterns of our own depravity.

I want to focus on two aspects of prayer here.

- The first has to do with what Paul means (and doesn’t mean) by the opposing concepts of “anxiety” and “peace” as it relates to prayer.
- The second asks *how* the Lord is “near us” (v. 5) and “with us” (v.9) to guard if he is not physically present?

### Ila. Anxiety and Peace

In a culture in which recent statistics estimate that some **19% of American adults struggle each year with anxiety disorders** (that’s 40 million individuals across the country), we have to be careful that we don’t misread what Paul is saying or promising here.

Prayer, for Paul, is not, an alternative to a holistic approach to self-care and health care—including mental health. Prayer plays a major role in the overall well-being of a Christian. But the results of prayer often work through other means by which God accomplishes his purposes.

Christian prayer is not pseudo-sorcery. Rather, prayer is communicating with God and surrendering to his sovereign governance over all things. Trusting that his peace and presence will be with us—whatever the answer to that prayer might eventually be.

In Philippians 4, “anxiety” and “peace” function within Paul’s broader exhortation to pursue unity in Christ for the sake of the gospel.

“Peace,” in that setting, is

- not primarily **not a sublime emotional state**, achieving the “ultimate sense of being chill” or “zen” or “tranquil.”
- not the peace achieved by peppermint tea or burning essential oils.
- it’s not the total resolution of all perceived stress or psychological anxiety.

These things may well be positively impacted by prayer; but they’ll likely always remain as a thorn in our side because they are **residual effects of the fall on embodied existence**.

Your anxiety is *real*. The struggle is real. The response of Paul is not the trite truisms of bumper sticker theology, but instead God’s own power and personal presence through prayer.

+ Instead of stresslessness or emotional tranquility, “peace” in the New Testament refers to the **“ceasing of sin’s hostile power** through the atoning work Christ’s death on the cross.” Peace is another way of saying “reconciliation.”

As Paul says in the letter to the Colossians, Jesus Christ has made “peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20).”

Philippians 4 is a reminder that regardless of how we feel; Christ has made relational peace between God and sinful humanity.

- Outside of Christ we are at enmity with God;
- + in Christ we are reconciled us to God.

We are at peace with the greatest force of good in the universe. And that peace makes itself present through prayer.

Peace as the end of hostility, not necessarily the end of stress, is our inheritance in Christ.

[Transition] The second point I want to make here has to do with *how* Christ is present with us.

### **IIb. Christ is present by His Spirit working through the Word**

We might say: “Ok, Paul. You keep saying that **Christ is “near us”** (v.5) and **“with us”** (v.9). But *how*? How does Christ guide our hearts and minds if he is not physically here? Following the teaching of Scripture, we believe that Jesus is present with us through his Word by his Spirit.

When it comes to prayer, we often envision *ourselves* as the ones initiating the conversation with God. We’re asking him things. Making requests. It starts with us.

We forget that *God* is the one who started the conversation. God was the first to speak and he still speaks to us, in his incarnate Word Jesus and through his inspired, infallible written Word, the Bible.

God's Word is not meant to be passively observed as a monologue; but actively engaged as a dialogue. It's not merely an ancient artifact containing religious ideas; it's an address from God to his people.

**God's word is not just a bunch of propositions; it's a prompt.** Prayer is our response to his prompt. Are we listening to the prompt? Are we speaking back? Or, are we ignoring the prompt and treating prayer like a one-way conversation that starts with us.

In contemporary culture, if we call or text someone and don't get an answer, we call that 'ghosting'. We often wonder: why is God ghosting me? But might it be that we're the ones who are ghosting God? Either by praying infrequently (or never); or by attempting to respond to God apart from his own cues and character expressed in his Word? Attempting to start a different conversation, based on our expectations and will? Like a person who isn't really listening to you speak, but only waiting for their turn to respond.

Maybe God's the one "on hold" [reprise *Opus #1* groove] waiting for us to frame our prayers in ways that respond to his prompts in Scripture. Prayer that not only brings our problems to God, but that brings us God's peace, presence, and power through God's Word by the Holy Spirit.

[Application—How Might one actually practice this?]

The Anglican Book of Common Prayer around which we organize our services is really just Scripture arranged for worship. The BCP provides us with 2000 years of shared resources to help us pray from the prompts of Scripture, and to thus pray our way to peace and rejoice our way to reasonableness.

- Daily Office Website (<https://www.dailyoffice2019.com/>)
- Daily Office App (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/the-daily-office/id1513851259>)
- ESV Bible App (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/esv-bible/id361797273>)

### **Conclusion – “Where were we, Lord?”**

“Think these things” (v. 8), says Paul, but he doesn't stop there. He also says “practice these things.” And that practice comes with a promise: not only that God's peace will be with you but that “the God of peace will be with you.”

There will be times when holding the hands of a terminally ill loved one, we can sense the end is near; and we press in together in prayer. It's another reason why the Book of Common Prayer is so helpful. It gives us words to speak and pray that fix our eyes on God, when we have no words left to speak.

At that moment, prayers for healing have past, prayers for recovery have passed. There is no recovery expected—only relief from suffering and the certain hope of the resurrection.

We're not searching for answers at those moments. We're not even really seeking God to grant any specific request. In those moments we are aiming for one thing: to sense the comfort of the abiding presence of almighty God with us. In our fear. In our trepidation. In our poverty of spirit and our scarcity of strength.

Christian, know this: when you hold the hand of a saint at death's door, and on that day when reality is reversed and it is your hand being held. Your children grown, standing beside you. A sense of your own mortality finally sinking in. You will feel many things. But of the many things you may feel, know this: if you are in Christ, in those moments **you are not alone**.

You are not abandoned. Your prayers are not on hold.

Your cries into the darkness of the night do not fall upon deaf ears; they fall upon the ever-present attentiveness of almighty God who is in your midst through those prayers.

Into the greatest emptiness conceivable there will come the greatest epiphany imaginable—Jesus Christ beside you, Jesus Christ with you, Jesus Christ for you.

And as you close your eyes on this life, by faith and through his power you will enter into his presence on the other side. And you will open your eyes, eager to speak as if with an old friend after a strange, short pause. You'll continue right where you left off before death stole your last breath, "now, where were we, Lord?"

**Let us pray:**

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time, with one accord to make our common supplications to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will grant their requests: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions **as may be best for us**; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting. Amen.

(A Prayer of St. John Chrysostom, BCP 2019)

## Study Questions

- (1) In Philippians 4:2, Paul exhorts two of his co-workers in Philippi to “agree in the Lord.” So often difficulties in relationships come down to differences of personality, preference, and opinion on significant matters, but matters not essential to salvation. We examined some common strategies used to deal with disagreements: aggression, passive-aggression, and then, surprisingly, prayer in the form of rejoicing in God’s saving power and abiding presence with us. What patterns of prayer and spiritual disciplines can we develop to assist us in avoiding adopting a bullying persona or a passive-aggressive persona, so that we can deal openly and healthily with conflict? What are some tangible ways that we can practice rejoicing as a proactive spiritual discipline of praise that leads to reasonableness and peace in our own lives and the lives of others?
- (2) Do you pray out of Scripture, or around Scripture? Do you see God’s Word as the first word in a dialogue and prayer as the response to the prompt of God’s Word? Or, does Scripture and prayer operate in separate lanes? Are you ghosting God, and not praying at all?
- (3) As a means of your ongoing training in spiritual formation and liturgical interpretive dance, search Opus #1 by Tim Carleton on Spotify or YouTube, play the song, and then engage in a competitive dance contest with those around you.
- (4) Have you used and/or are you aware of the many free resources (linked to below) offered by the Anglican Church in North America to engage in Scripture-saturated prayerful response to God based on his Word? How might God’s peace be made present through prayer in your life, and God’s reasonableness be made active through rejoicing, by using the guardrails and landmarks of the church in resources like these to pray the word?
- (5) How can the practice of prayer bring us peace not only in our day to day lives, but in our darkest moments when death encroaches upon us or upon the one’s we love? If you find prayer difficult, discuss how strange it would feel to enter eternity and only *then* become a friend and conversation partner of Jesus? Would it be like the weird small talk at a party where you don’t know the other guests? What would be the result if we took up that non-communicative pattern with our friends, co-workers, spouses, and family members? What is the result of infrequent or unclear communication between people? How does that relate to the strength or weakness of our faith and relationship with Christ if our prayer life is infrequent or unclear?