

“Moving from Anxiety to Joy—Joy In The Face of Conflict”

Today we're continuing in this series of sermons called "Moving from Anxiety to Joy." To find out how we can move from anxiety to the joy that God wants for our lives, we'll be looking at the book of Philippians in the Bible. It's been called Paul's letter, or epistle, of joy because 14 times in four chapters Paul refers to joy--his own joy or the joy of those Christians in the city of Philippi that are being persecuted for their faith. In fact, he commands them to rejoice, again and again and again. Then he gives the keys of how to find deep, lasting joy in your life, no matter what your circumstances are. If Paul can find joy in a dingy Roman prison cell, if he can have joy chained to a Roman soldier awaiting his own execution, then we can find joy in the midst of our circumstances.

Two men had stores across the street from each other. They competed for the same customers. Their rivalry became intense, and the shopkeepers began to hate each other. They became angry when their customers went into the other store, and sometimes they would yell nasty things at each other across the street. They were always trying to one-up each other in advertising and sales and each time the other would do something their anger would just get turned up another notch. Sometimes customers would shop in both stores and that just made them angrier. A few of the customers started to pick up on that anger and started to drive to another town to do their shopping and this made them even angrier. Their lives were being consumed. Up in heaven God saw that this was getting out of hand, so he sent an angel down to work it out.

The angel appeared to one of the men and said, "I am going to grant you any wish you ask. If you wish for riches, you will get riches. But whatever you wish for, the man across the street will get double. If you wish for honor, the man across the street will get double honor. If you wish for customers you will get them, but he will get twice as many." There was a long silence. The angel was sure the man had learned his lesson. The man thought for a second and said, "All right. Strike me blind in one eye." Thinking he might have better luck across the street, the angel went through the same drill with the competitor. The man thought for a moment and said with a smile: "Scare me half to death."

One of the primary things in life that can rob us of joy is conflict. Conflict in our homes, in our work places, in our neighborhoods, and even in our churches. So let me ask a very general question this morning: How many of you have faced some sort of conflict in your life? Raise your hands. Did that conflict rob you of some of your joy? Raise your hand if it did.

We all know it. Conflict with a spouse, or child, or parent can make home life almost unbearable. Conflict with somebody at work, can make your job seem like a prison sentence. Conflict in your neighborhood can make you want to sell your house and leave! Conflict in the church can make you wonder if it's even worth being a follower of Jesus. Conflict can rob us of our joy and make life hard in the very places that we want peace, and comfort, and stability.

In this letter on joy, Paul addresses conflict. But let's back up a minute and understand something about letter-writing in the 1st century. You see, when Paul writes a letter, it was a big deal. In that day and age, paper was rare and very expensive, so was ink. To send a letter meant hiring somebody to make the journey to deliver it. It was a major investment of money to send a letter, so when Paul wrote a letter it was a serious undertaking. Whatever he wrote about was important and the issues he was addressing in those letters were important. He didn't have the luxury of just rambling about nothing. He weighed his words and wrote what he believed was most important.

Last week we talked about how Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison and how this letter is in part a thank you letter because the church in Philippi had sent one of their church members, Epaphroditus, to Paul to sustain him and encourage him. But that wasn't the only reason for the letter. He wasn't just thanking them, there's something going on in Philippi that needs some attention.

You see, he's heard about a concern in the congregation that he knows could damage that church and its mission. What was the problem or concern? Well he hints at it throughout the letter but doesn't really state

it until the very end. Look at chapter 4 verses 2-3, **“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel...” (Philippians 4:2-3, NRSV).**

You might say, “Well, so what? What’s the big deal about that passage?” Here’s the big deal. This letter was meant to be read in front of that whole church. The church was small and everybody knew everybody. The people gathered, probably in somebody’s home, they ate, they prayed, they sang, then somebody stood up to read this precious letter from Paul. They all sat there listening intently to hear from the man they loved and respected. The preacher is standing there excited to read the letter, but as he gets to chapter four, can you imagine the reaction! Euodia is sitting over here and Syntyche is sitting over here, as far away from Euodia as she can possibly sit. Can you imagine their reaction when they heard their names? I imagine them sinking down in their chairs thinking, “Oh no! Paul, writing from prison, had to mention us!”

This is no small thing! Paul is in prison, in Rome, two month’s journey from Philippi, and he’s heard that there’s a fight going on between two friends; between two Christians. The typical scenario when there’s conflict is that we rally our supporters. So Euodia had talked to all of her friends and convinced them all how she was right. And Syntyche had talked to all her friends about how she was right. Can you picture that church? With one section of chairs in the middle where nobody was sitting! Euodia’s faction over here and Syntyche’s over here!

As you read Paul’s other letters you find out that early Christians in those early churches occasionally had a tough time getting along with each other. Sometimes Christians **still** have a tough time getting along with each other. There are times when we as Christians will disagree with each other. There are times when we might disagree and as we disagree we might stake out our territory and pretty soon we might be in a full-blown fight and we can’t stand to be in the same room with somebody.

If that happens in a church, sometimes we decide to leave the church so that we don’t have to see that person. Of course, here, if you’re in conflict with somebody you have 2 locations and 4 different worship services to choose from. But those folks in Philippi, they couldn’t go to another church, there weren’t any other churches! They had two choices: leaving the church which meant leaving the gospel; or staying connected to Christ and figuring out how to work through the conflict. The problem was that Euodia and Syntyche were not working through it.

But notice that Paul doesn’t take sides in this issue. I guarantee you that if Paul knew that one side was right and the other side was wrong, he would have taken a side. I guarantee you that, because Paul always just laid it out there. But he didn’t do that here. He knew what the conflict was about, but neither of these two women was right or wrong. Maybe both of them were right!

Did you know that you can have a conflict where both people are right? They’re both right, they’re just seeing something from a different perspective. If this were a theological issue, Paul would have settled it. If it was a matter of right or wrong, Paul would have settled it. But he doesn’t settle the issue because neither was wrong. That’s true in so many of our conflicts. They are simply a difference of opinion.

But Paul also recognizes that sometimes, when we’re in conflict, we’re never going to resolve that conflict ourselves—we need someone’s help to resolve it. So Paul writes to a close friend in that church and says, “Please help these two women get along, please intervene, don’t let it go any further.” We all know what happens when we let conflict fester. It starts out with a little wall in between two people. Then the next day you add a few more bricks, and the a few more, and few more. After a while those two people can hardly stand each other anymore.

You’ve seen it happen before, haven’t you? Maybe in your own family, with your spouse. You have a fight, you don’t settle the fight so the next day you don’t talk to each other, and the next day you don’t talk to each other. By the third or fourth day you’re so mad at each other that you can’t remember why you got mad in the first place. I’ve read that it takes about 30 days for a great marriage to fall apart completely under those circumstances. Just 30 days. I’ve talked to people who haven’t spoken to their parents in years and years over something that nobody really remembers anymore.

My wife has this irritating little quality in her. It's that she is almost always right! A while back, years ago, I remember sitting one evening and complaining to her about something that wasn't going my way. I don't really remember what it was, but I got started complaining a little, but before I knew it I was in a full-fledged whine-a-thon! Janet is so patient, so level-headed. She sat there for a while and listened quietly and then when I had paused for a moment she interjected something. She came to the defense of whatever it was that I was complaining about. And what had taken me a good 20 minutes of complaining to build up, she tore it down in one well-spoken sentence. And...it ticked me off.

I can always tell when I'm tired and stressed because my fuse is so short. And it was extra short that night. I was so mad that I did something I can't ever remember doing. I just got up and left the room--I just walked out. I went into my study and started doing something. A little while later she came in and asked me what I was doing, I said, "I'm avoiding you." She asked why—as if she didn't know! And I told her. She kind of snickered and walked out.

As I sat there and steamed for a while longer I realized that I could go two directions with this. I could make it worse by feeding my anger, or I could take another look at what I was complaining about. I took another look. And I thought to myself, "This is the dumbest little thing to be irritated about!" Then I started to think, "You know, this is the woman who I would do anything for...I would lay down my life for her. And I'm going to be mad about this?" The longer I thought about it I came to the realization that I always come to...she was right!

Isn't that how it works in our lives?! Conflict brews over something that doesn't ultimately matter and we forget the really important things and somewhere along the way we have to take a step. And Paul tells us what that step is. Here's what Paul says to Euodia and Syntyche. He says, **"If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..."** (Philippians 2:1-5, NRSV).

This is a profound passage of scripture! The answer that Paul is prescribing for these two women, whatever it was they were fighting about, was actually very simple. "Please, when you look at each other, Euodia and Syntyche, please consider her better than yourself. Consider her claim to being right, higher than your claim to being right. Look at your sister and love her and recognize that Christ loved her. Put her needs before you own. Don't fight each other out of vain conceit or ambition, but instead, instead seek to serve each other. And have the heart of Christ toward each other."

What would have happened if they took that seriously? If they had got it? If Euodia had looked at Syntyche and said, "You are my sister in Christ. Christ died for you and I'm going to spend eternity in heaven with you and I'm going to try to be like Christ to you. I'm going to try to minister to you and bless you, and if I can minister to you by seeing the situation like you see it, instead of becoming angry, then it's worth it."

Paul says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Then he describes the mind of Christ. What does that look like? Verses 6-11 tell us. Paul says this, he's quoting something else. Scholars believe that he was quoting a poem or an early Christian song. In fact this is the oldest Christian song, or hymn, that we know of. He says, **"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him..."** (Philippians 2:5-9, NRSV).

Paul is saying, "This is how it's supposed to work. Instead of digging in your heels and trying to make sure that you win and get what you want, try this out. Try following the pattern Jesus set out for us in serving the other. And if that means that you let them prevail with their ideas or thoughts, then understand that you're doing it for the sake of Christ, to minister to that person and bless them. When Jesus humbled himself and became a servant, when he died as a servant, God exalted him."

That's what happens to us too. When we humble ourselves before others and before God; when we let the other person prevail in matters that aren't a big deal, God has a way of lifting us up and honoring us. And here's the kicker, when you've been in conflict and you make the choice that you're not going to be conflict any more, when you decide that you're not going to force your will on somebody else and instead choose to serve and bless that other person, you begin to find joy—no matter what they are feeling and thinking, you begin to find joy!

But before we begin to think that all conflict is bad, we need to know that sometimes conflicts are good. Sometimes they show us a better path, or a better way of doing things than we saw before. Sometimes they develop character, as long as we resolve the conflict according to scripture. The reality of conflict and the potential for conflict is everywhere, but if we know that in advance, and know how we're going to handle it when it comes, then we will not let conflict rob us of our joy.

Paul says this to the Philippians, **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4, NRSV)**. Remember that Paul is writing to Christians here! You mean Christians can do things out of selfish ambitions or conceit? You mean Christians can end up consumed with their own interests instead of the interests of others? You bet they can. Even those who have been born again, those who are followers of Jesus still face the temptation to do things out of selfish ambition and conceit. That, unfortunately is our human condition and that is why we need a Savior!

After we become Christians we won't struggle with ambition and conceit like we were before we were Christians, but we will still wrestle with them. Sometimes what we do is just hide our self-interest and ambition and conceit. We can bury this stuff deep and then it starts to attack us at deeper levels.

Jesus said, “If any of you would be great, you must become like a servant.” And then Jesus got down on his knees and washed the disciple's feet. “This,” he said, “is the key to greatness.” And this is the key to joy that Paul is writing about. Hear it one more time, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”

That's the key to joy that Paul was talking about. In the face of conflict to set aside your needs and consider others better than yourself, in the face of success, remember how God defines success. You can find joy in the face of conflict. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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