

Cultivating Personal Peace

Philippians 4

Pastor Thomas Becker

We have had something of a miniseries, not really intended, about peace. In the fall we wrapped up James chapter three, talking about peace within the community and about peacemaking. And then as part of the Christmas series, Pastor Danny shared with us about the peace that Christ brings and the fact that the only way that we can have peace is by having peace with God. And Jesus Christ came to bring us peace with God.

And today, I'd like to spend some time with you in Philippians chapter four, talking about how it is that we can cultivate personal peace, how it is that we can go through our days with a sense of peace and not anxiety. Which is significant. Earlier in December, we mentioned the fact that there is an epidemic of loneliness in our world. Well, even more so, there is an epidemic of anxiety in our world. It starts earlier and earlier. About 1 in 20 teenage girls are on prescription medications for anxiety and for depression. And that number, you might think it would decrease as we get older and more mature and able to handle things better, but it actually continues to increase until it reaches about 1 in 4 who are over 40. And in the demographic in which we move, suburban, it's even higher.

And it's no wonder. I was shocked when a young person shared with me their junior high project in which among the topics that they were able to research and write about was prescription drug abuse, climate change, racism, school shootings, etc.. How can we not be anxious if we surround ourselves and bathe ourselves in these painful aspects of our culture? But it doesn't have to be that way. We don't have to live with that kind of anxiety. Paul writes to us in the book of Philippians, we'll be reading chapter four verses four through nine, about an alternative.

Philippians 4:4-9: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 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. Whatever you've learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

Now I stand before you this morning as something of an anxiety addict, and so as I share these insights, I want you to understand first of all, that they are very personal for me. And second, that I'm on a journey. And it's a journey that I think many of us are on. And in one way or another, it's a journey that all of us are on. We are in a process of sanctification. That means there are things in our hearts and our minds and our souls that the Holy Spirit is at work, changing. I believe my wife can testify to you that, compared with about 15 years ago, we're in a much better spot. But this is a battle. The practice of personal peace, the cultivation of personal peace is something that I struggle with. And I believe, unfortunately, that many of us struggle with. And so it's something that is worth us spending some time on this morning.

A. Peace flows from the presence of Christ

1. Jesus came to bring peace

The first thing we see in this passage is that peace flows from the presence of Christ with us and in us. Peace flows from the presence of Christ. Jesus brought peace with Him. We just came through Christmas. We remember the angels singing “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth.” He came to bring peace. He spoke peace as He walked the dusty roads and shared with people. He said things like, “Do not worry.” “Come to Me, you who are weary and heavy laden.” To His troubled disciples He said, “Let not your hearts be troubled.” As He was preparing to leave them, He said, “I give you My peace. I'm leaving it with you, and it's not something that the world can take away from you.”

And in the Gospel of John, the very last words of John chapter 16. This is right before Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane where He's going to be betrayed and then tortured and then put to death, the last words that He speaks to his disciples. John 16:33, “I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

Jesus brings peace. And then this passage in Philippians chapter four starts with that fact: the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, and he goes on. The fundamental, the unshakable foundation of our peace is the presence of Jesus Christ, Who brings peace, Who brings peace with God, and Who brings peace into our hearts.

2. “The Lord is near”

It's really interesting. In John 16, right before Jesus is speaking about giving peace to His disciples, He tells them, “I am going away from you, but I'm not going to leave you as orphans. I am sending the Holy Spirit to you, and the Holy Spirit will be with you and will be

in you.” The Holy Spirit sent from Jesus is the presence of Christ, not only with us, but in us in an inseparably close relationship. And so the peace of Christ dwells in us. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is what? Love, joy, peace. Because the Holy Spirit is the presence of Christ in us, bringing the peace of Christ to us. That is where it all begins.

B. Peace is a prayer practice

1. What not to do: perpetuate anxiety

But part of my own problem is that for so long it began and it ended there. “Jesus brings peace, I ought to have peace.” Paul goes on in this passage to say, “Okay, so this is what you need to do. This is how you practice the peaceful presence of Christ in your own lives.” And the first thing that he actually says is what not to do. Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

So what not to do is perpetuate anxiety in our hearts and minds. I know some of you do it because I do it too, because it's part of what it means to be human and to struggle in these areas. To wake up in the wee hours of the night and to think about those anxious things, and to dwell on where it might lead and what might happen, and all the possible negative consequences. Perpetuating anxiety in our hearts and minds. Paul says, don't do it. In fact, the translation here could be stop worrying about *anything*, not the big *everything*. Stop worrying about everything, stop worrying about anything. Stop worrying about any little thing or any big thing. Do not let anything disturb your personal peace. It's his command.

Our natural reaction to life's troubles is to be distracted and burdened by the possibilities, by the future. But Jesus tells us, who of you by worrying can change anything in your life? You can't add an hour to your life. You can't add a hair to your head. You can't change anything that's going to happen by sitting there worrying about it, by perpetuating that anxiety, by dwelling on it. Your Father knows. You don't know, your Father knows, and He's got it. You're in His hands.

Do not worry. Now we might think, “Hey, that's easy to say. Thanks, Paul. Really appreciate that.” We do well to remind ourselves of Paul's situation at that point. If there's anybody who had a reason for sleepless nights and for concern about his well-being in the future, it was Paul as he's writing these words. Because he's in prison. He's in prison in Rome, he's on trial with his life on the line, and he anticipates that is probably going to go badly for him. Meanwhile, there's trouble in the outside part of Paul's world and in his ministry and other

things. He can be worried about all the stuff, but he himself is able to say, I'm not anxious about anything because God offers me a solution. And that solution is prayer.

2. What to do: tell God about it

What to do is tell God about it. Present your requests to God. Our prayer lives progress from a stage of spiritual beginnings as we mature in our faith. And very often at the beginning of our prayer lives, there's a whole lot of asking going on. "God bless me, God, please take care of this problem. God, please give me this thing." Then we start to realize, you know what? God is not a vending machine. I do a little bit better if I am praising Him and I am thanking Him, and we start to have a little bit of an allergy to asking. But it's okay. It's okay to ask. Jesus actually tells us that we can go to our Heavenly Father like a child goes to his or her parent and tell God what we want and what we need.

We don't need to be afraid of asking. We just need to make sure that it's in its proper place. One of my favorite incidents in Jesus' life in this regard is when Bartimaeus, blind Bartimaeus, is along the side of the road and Jesus is passing by and he cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He catches Jesus's ear. Jesus gives him His attention and He asks him this question, "What do you want?" Jesus doesn't say, "Bartimaeus, what's the reason that you're going through this difficulty in your life? Bartimaeus, what is it that you think that God wants to accomplish through this? Bartimaeus, what am I going to do about this situation?" He doesn't quiz Bartimaeus about things that Bartimaeus does not know and understand. He simply says, what do you want?

And God asks us that question. Now we answer in a mindset of faith, trusting God with the results, knowing we can't control the future and we can't understand God's ways. But it's okay to tell Him what we think we need and what we want. And so Paul says, we come to God with prayer and petition and with thanksgiving. Those are the three ways that we present our requests to God. The word for prayer is a general word for talking with God about things.

Just this morning, I was talking with a dear friend about telling God about it. We don't need to formalize our prayers. We don't need to make sure that our language is acceptable to Him, and that it's filled with the right kind of words, and that it's high and lofty sounding. God just wants us to tell Him about it. If you need an example of that, go to the book of Psalms. To some of the places where David was in absolute desperation, where his emotions were all jumbled up, and he doesn't sort it out and present a nice, clean prayer to God. He pours it out, recognizing that God's shoulders are broad enough, that His back is strong enough to handle the mix and mess of human emotions, and to sort it through Himself.

God invites us. He wants to be that friend who's closer than a brother or a sister. He wants to be that One that we can go to and lay it all out on the line. And the great thing about it is God knows it anyway, so we don't have to hide anything. We don't have to filter anything. We don't have to make sure we're not exposing some part of ourselves that we don't want somebody to be aware of in our inner world. We can lay it all out on the line, tell God about it, be completely open, and then we can start our asking. Prayer and petition.

--Ask Him

Petition is specifically the matter of bringing requests to God. And generally these requests arise from a place of need. "I need You, God, to intervene in this situation." I tell Him about the situation and I ask Him for what I think I need, for what's on my heart. Letting him sort it through.

And then thanksgiving. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Thanksgiving is grateful acknowledgment of God's past mercies at the same time as we are seeking Him for future mercies. And so we come to Him intentionally, thinking of what He has done in the past, the ways that He has demonstrated His grace and His faithfulness, thanking Him for what He is doing right now, even for the difficult situation that we find ourselves in and that we're praying about, and thanking Him already for his future answer.

Because we know that He's good, that He's perfect in all His ways, and that whatever answer He sends is going to be exactly right for His child. So let's walk through this. Maybe in a more practical way. Let's pick the example of impending job loss. I don't know of anybody in this room who's facing that right now, but it seems like these days we all, who are in the work world, kind of live with this underlying anxiety about the economy and about where things are headed and the direction of the company that we're working for or whatever it might be.

What is prayer and petition and thanksgiving when that letter comes: "You don't need to come to work on Monday morning"? Well, first of all, prayer is telling God about it. "God, I'm afraid. I'm afraid for my future. And I'm afraid for my family's future. I'm afraid for our mortgage. I'm afraid for how we're going to put food on the table. God, I feel betrayed. I've put in so much time. I have been so loyal. And here I am, just being tossed out."

And I'm probably doing an inadequate job of describing the depth of pain and emotion. But God says bring it to Me and tell Me about it. So often we think, if only I could tell somebody about it and God says, "Yes, tell Me about it!"

And then petition. "God, please provide for my family. I don't know how I'm going to do it. I need a job. I don't even know where to start looking. Will You guide my steps as I apply?"

Lord, how do I tell my wife? How do I tell my friends? I'm embarrassed." Asking Him for wisdom. Asking Him for provision. Telling Him what it is that we feel like we need and that we can trust Him to provide.

And then thanking Him. We do so well to remember, "Lord, you have always provided. There has not been a moment that You have not met our needs. Thank You for these years that You have walked with me and my family and have provided our needs. Thank You that in this other circumstance where I didn't know how things would work out, You provided an answer in a way that I couldn't anticipate. And God, thank You that right now here I am, closer to You in prayer than I've been in a long time, because this situation is driving me to my knees in faith before You. And God, thank You. I know that You will provide. I don't know how, but You've never failed and You will not fail me. And so I trust You."

3. What He promises: peace

With prayer and petition and thanksgiving, bringing our requests to God. And then God makes a promise. He doesn't promise that we're going to get a better paying job closer to home and a higher position. He does promise that the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. I love the fact that it transcends all understanding, because we want to figure it all out. Sort out all the possible outcomes, prepare for each one of them, and if we can control the situation in our mind, then maybe we'll have peace. And God says you can't control the situation. You have no idea how it's going to turn out. You do not understand why this is happening, and you don't understand how it's all going to work out okay in the end, but I can give you a peace that transcends understanding. "How can you be so peaceful in this situation?" "Honestly, I have no idea. Except I brought it to God and He gave me peace."

And that's what He promises. And He promises a peace that guards your heart and your mind. The word there is describing soldiers who are on duty at the gates of a city, or a garrison. When our heart, which is the center of our emotions, and when our mind where this battle is taking place, are under assault, God gives His peace like soldiers surrounding our heart and mind against the assault of the evil one, to guard our inner world. A peace that transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So we recognize that peace is built upon the fact that Jesus is near. He's in us, and He is the provider of peace. And we follow through this prescription of prayer, cultivating personal peace by turning aside from the anxiety and instead turning to the Lord through prayer and receiving His peace. Many of you have heard me talk about this in the past. Well, there's two more verses that are important in this battle that we are fighting. He transitions there in that verse to our minds. The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard

your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. And then he goes on to talk about our minds. Philippians 4:8-9: "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. Whatever you've learned or received or heard from me or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." Peace is a prayerful practice and peace is a mindful practice.

C. Peace is a mindful practice

1. Break the cycle

We're breaking a cycle of anxious thinking, displacing anxiety with the good things that God gives us to think about. Boy, am I familiar with that cycle. I imagine that many of you are as well. For me, it usually would come after a couple hours of good solid sleep. Something wakes me up and the cycle starts. Maybe it's rehearsing a conversation. Maybe it's playing out the possible scenarios. For some reason, it's really not a mystery, in the wee hours of the night, when you're in that state of half sleep and half wakefulness, all of those things magnify themselves and the cycle builds upon itself. But that cycle can continue through the day. That cycle of anxious thinking, rehearsing, replaying.

Paul says, break the cycle. Don't think about those things, instead, think about these things. That is a battle. It's not something we can presume upon. It's something we need to be prepared to fight for over and over again, turning our thoughts from one thing to another thing. It's a great spiritual exercise in many areas of temptation. When temptation comes in, having something that we can replace it with.

What are the things that Paul tells us we can replace anxiety with? Things that are true. Things that are lovely. Things that are pure and are praiseworthy. He's telling us to change the input in our lives, and I think it's worth drilling down on this a little bit. Is it any wonder that kids in junior high and senior high struggle with anxiety when they're supposed to spend how many hours writing an essay on violence, on crime, on an ecological disaster, or whatever it might be?

And then how about those of us who aren't in school anymore, but allow our minds to be educated by what our social media feed or what our news feed brings us, and we bathe ourselves in anxiety. Paul says, think about what is true. Let me tell you, brothers and sisters, what Facebook or Twitter or TikTok, or whatever it is, is feeding you is not oriented towards giving you truth. It is oriented toward selling you things based on outrage or manipulation of your emotions and of your mind. Is it any wonder that we live in anxiety when we spend hours inputting lies and manipulation, instead of inputting what is true?

The same goes for purity. Think about what is pure. Is it any wonder that we live in anxiety when we expose our eyes and our minds and our hearts to the sewage that modern entertainment offers us? Our souls are troubled. Well, isn't it true what they say? "Garbage in, garbage out." Whatever is excellent or praiseworthy. Not what is outrageous.

So what is true? Jesus said the Word is truth. Jesus said, "I am. Jesus, the Truth." What is excellent and praiseworthy? "O Lord, how excellent, how marvelous are Your ways!" When it comes down to it, what we're talking about in these verses is Jesus. All that He is and all that He does, and everything that He has said to us in His Word.

2. Change the input

--We need what is true, pure, and praiseworthy

And so if we want to replace, if we want to really fight that battle of replacing the negative mindset with the positive, peaceful mindset. Then we're coming back to the things that we've talked about so many times before. Memorize Scripture, have it on hand for those moments when you're right in the middle of battle. Practice that thanksgiving, remembering the true and the excellent and the praiseworthy things that God has done. Spend time in the Word really getting to know Jesus, because He is all that is noble and excellent and praiseworthy. Think about such things. I am not saying don't read the news. But I do have kind of an inner gauge and actually it's a pretty low tolerance. I only need to spend a few minutes on Google News, and my anxiety level is increasing, and it's time to turn to prayer about all of these things.

4. Intentional imitation

The last thing that Paul urges upon us is intentional imitation. He says, whatever you have seen in me, put it into practice. We can extend that. My favorite verses in this area are Hebrews chapter 11, and then chapter 12 verse 1. Hebrews 11, the hall of fame of faith. People who accomplished great things because of faith, people who suffered terrible things because of faith. And then the author says, look to them as you are going through your present struggle. Imitate the faith of those who have gone before us. And the result is, the God of peace will be with you.

The God of Peace will be with you

I love how this theme is repeated. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious. Pray, and the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds. Think about these things, and the God of peace will be with you. Paul is stringing these things together to help us cultivate that inner personal peace that we so desperately need. So please remember these things.

--The Author of peace dwells in you

The Author of peace dwells in you. Practice the presence of Christ.

--Prayer is the spiritual antidote to anxiety

Prayer is the spiritual antidote to anxiety. Please understand there can be chemical and physical things that are going on. Sometimes we need medication, but when we are fighting a spiritual battle with anxiety, prayer is the antidote. With petition and thanksgiving, present your request to God.

--Exercise control over your input and mindset

Exercise control. This is not a passive battle. "God, give me Your peace." Exercise control over your input and your mindset. Think about such things.

--Jesus said, "Trust in God, trust also in Me" (John 14:1)

And then, as Jesus told his disciples when they were so deeply troubled. "You trust in God. Trust also in Me." Do not let your hearts be troubled. Let's pray together.

Jesus, we have so much to thank You for. And today we come to remember the cross and all that You did on our behalf. And part of what You did was to make peace. Thank You that You, who are the Author of peace, made the promise that You would never leave us and never forsake us. In the darkest times, when things seem most hopeless, when the pain seems overwhelming, when the future is in shadows, You are there. You always have been and You aren't going anywhere. And You offer us hope, You offer us life, You offer us peace. Thank You that You understand us. Thank You that You do not despise our struggles. You don't tell us just to get over it. You don't say, stop it. You were tempted in every way, even as we are, yet without sin. You experienced anguish as You anticipated the cross. You welcome us to come to You in our weakness and in our struggles. You ask us to give You our cares and concerns and burdens. Lord, I pray for my brothers and sisters. I pray for those who are struggling deeply in this matter. Lord, that You would give us the grace to fight the battle. To do the praying. To replace that anxious cycle with thoughts of You in all of Your glory and holiness and perfection and goodness and grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.