

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Philippians 4:1-9

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What a wonderful week it has been! It's been a full two months since I left Charlottesville and made the move to Waco. Much of that two months was spent thinking and dreaming about church in general and DaySpring in particular as the conversation with the search committee proceeded onward. Two weeks ago I was with you in several town hall style conversations as we began to get to know one another. If you have ever gone through security at the airport, you can understand a bit of what that felt like. I had my baggage checked to be sure I wasn't bringing on any banned substances like toothpaste, a water bottle, or a dangerous hermeneutical reading of scripture. My identity was examined to see if it was a fit with yours. One of you even suggested I take off my shoes. You said this is holy ground. You talked about how great the last leg of the trip was and how hopeful you are about the next leg and all the places we can go together.

Then you welcomed me on board. Jenny and I sat in the emotional waiting room last Sunday afternoon waiting patiently, sort of, for the news that you had voted, and that my boarding pass would be accepted to join this flight. When I finally received the call Sunday night, we soared.

Philippians tells us, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice." But honestly, sometimes I don't feel like rejoicing. Sometimes rejoicing is a matter of discipline if it happens at all. We rejoice because we know we should, but we don't really feel joy so we rummage around our theological attics to find something for which to praise God. We come up with pretty standard stuff—praise God for creation, for health, for family and friends, for salvation. We are thankful for these things, but more because we are thankful rather than we feel thankful. Any rejoicing is done more out of a sense of obligation rather than genuine appreciation. You probably come to worship feeling that way sometimes, too. Our rejoicing comes first and the feeling comes later. Sunday morning worship can be good for that. You don't come every week on an emotional or spiritual high. But you come. And usually you leave glad you came. In the course of a Sunday morning, you find something worth celebrating.

We can do a lot worse than spend time together thinking of whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, anything of excellence. Anything worthy of praise. These are hopeful words when your heart is downcast or you just feel spiritually empty. They are encouraging words when you feel like you are on top of the world.

This week for us has been pure joy. Rejoicing in our lives has overflowed from the joy of being a part of DaySpring. Jenny and I agree in our spirits that this is where we belong. We want to go on this journey with you wherever it leads us, trusting the one who is guiding this vessel. None of us are exactly sure where it goes from here, but we trust the pilot.

Speaking of which, several years ago I was standing in line at a North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles Office. The DMV in our little town was a counter in the back of the feed and seed store. So you can get your Purina Cat Chow, your choice of 18 varieties of tomato seeds, and your driver's license all in one trip. You can also get a vanity plate for the front bumper of your car.

Like any other DMV, customers have a while in line to contemplate the meaning of life or find your vanity plates. Sometimes the meaning of life converges with vanity plates. Some of the options there at the rack next to the line allow you to support your favorite team, as long as that team is the Tarheels, the Wolfpack, or the Blue Devils. Go Duke. Some of the plates say, "I'd rather be fishing" or "My other car is a John Deere." Stuff like that.

But the overwhelming majority of options are very religious, most of which were of questionable evangelistic effectiveness. "See you at Sunday School." Does that get anyone to Sunday School? "Jesus is the reason." For what? For the dent I just put in your back bumper? But there were two plates that taken together sent me standing in line spiraling in an existential and reflective vortex of metaphor and theology. The first plate had a generic insignia of commercial airline wings along with the words, "God is my pilot." But right next to it on the rack was an almost identical plate from the same company that read, "God is my co-pilot." Which one to buy? Which one is it? Is this a statement of whether I believe in free will or predestination? What's at stake here? Unable to decide, I bought both of them. If they'd also had one that read, "God is my flight engineer," I would have bought all three and made a Trinitarian lesson out of it. The Father is the pilot, The Son is the . . .oh, I don't know.

So as of Sunday night, we join you on this journey with God whether God is flying the plane or is the plane itself or is the air we breathe along the way. Some of you have been comfortably in your seats now for 15 years, smiling and offering welcomes to the stream of fellow passengers who have joined you since. Some of you are just getting on board along with me and looking for a place to see where your luggage fits and you are buckling your seatbelt, but you don't yet know the name of the person seated next to you. I hope you'll find out before you leave today.

So this week we took off. Wheels up. The sensation of going from placidly observing and watching you from a distance to, in a moment, being your pastor feels like comfortably sitting in a plane, looking out at the landscape and then being sucked out of the window now with the wind blasting your face, heart racing. I mean, in a good way, without all the falling to certain death parts. As the rush of emotions, new relationships, and responsibilities has blown into my life, I have fresh appreciation that for both the Hebrews and the Greeks the word for the rushing wind in your face is the same word for God's Spirit. It has been a full wonderful week. Each of your calls, emails, and visits has been a rich blessing to me. Thank you. Thank you for beginning to share your lives with me as you share your church with our family.

So with this sense of excitement, joy, and the appreciation for your passion and love for DaySpring and the life of Christ, one word in the Philippians text just seems underdressed for the party. It seems kind of homely. This is a beautiful, favorite passage for many people. This is an underline in your Bible passage. Read verses 6-7: Do not be anxious. Be prayerful. God's surpassing peace will guard you.

But sandwiched between these verses and “Rejoice in the Lord” is this line in my translation, “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” There’s nothing wrong with being reasonable. A reasonable person is easier to be around than some other alternatives, but is this the chief virtue that should be known to everyone? Can you imagine the advertising campaign “Come to Dayspring. Be reasonable.” It’s not all that inspiring. Sounds like something a fire and brimstone preacher in Garrison Keeler’s Lake Wobegon might say. “Be reasonable.” What is the point of that? What are outsiders going to say? “Wow, Jesus must be the Son of God; look how reasonable those Christians are.” Other English translations only add to the sense that something is off here: moderation, gentleness, consideration, forbearance.

Something about that at this point in the letter seems too tame. To be reasonable is to be calculating and limited. There was little about Paul’s faith and life that was reasonable, measured, or sensible. To another early Christian community he describes his life, talking as he says like a madman: labors, imprisonments, beatings, often near death. Lashed, beaten with rods, stoned. Shipwrecked, in danger from all sorts of people, sleepless nights, hungry, thirsty, cold, wet. Anyone want to sign up for foreign missions right about now? Just a bit later, in the next paragraph, Paul will say, “I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” That kind of faith is hard won. Some of you know what this means.

As you might guess, reasonableness is a poor substitute for the actual meaning here. So are forbearance, moderation, and consideration. But it’s not an easy word to define. In two other places in the New Testament, it means the opposite of a brawler. In James it is an attribute of God’s wisdom along with purity, peaceableness, and full of mercy. Aristotle contrasted it with ‘strict justice’.

It means a generous treatment of others. It is a person who is willing to engage the other and give second chances. It is God who allowed Adam and Eve to live though he had warned them, “If you eat the fruit of the tree you will die.” It is, “Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone.” It is, “Peter, do you love me?” “Judas, do what you must.” “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” This quality is of such importance that the apostle demands that it become evident among Christians to such a degree that it will be seen and recognized by everyone.

One author, Brian McLaren, recently coined the phrase “Generous Orthodoxy.” I think that might be a close approximation of the meaning here and our charge. If you are unsatisfied with fuzzy liberalism and turned off by angry fundamentalism, this third way is more than a middle moderate way. It’s a way back to our ancient roots and it’s a way forward into the future.

I think it means something like this. Live your faith, believe with all your heart, seek truth with your mind, and do so without anxiety to prove you are right all the time or doggedly defend what understanding you think you’ve got. It’s a posture of confidence without arrogance, passion without anger, love without control.

McLaren proposes clear and right thinking practiced with *humility*, *charity*, *courage*, and *diligence*. *Humility* that allows us to admit that our formulations may have been limited or distorted. *Charity* toward those of other traditions who may understand some things better than we have. *Courage* to be faithful to the true path of our faith, as we understand it, even when it is

unpopular, dangerous, and difficult to do. *Diligence* to seek again and again the true path of our faith whenever we feel we have lost our way, which seems to be pretty often.

Studying this word this week, I felt like I had a secret to share. I've found a church with this spirit. When the founders started this fellowship they went all in. And 15 years later, your orthodoxy and your generosity and your generous orthodoxy have become known. Even more profoundly and centrally, in this place, the Lord is near. Fifteen years later, the God of all-surpassing peace is in this place and meets and guards the hearts of all who come here. May this continue to be true and may this same wind blow in our lives for the next 15 years as well.

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