

The Christian's Affections

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. ⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4–7)

As a boy growing up in a secular home, I did not have much exposure to the person of Jesus. We had one Bible picture storybook. I vaguely remember some of my Bible education classes in primary school. But I do remember watching a TV show that dramatised the Gospels. It was usually on on a Sunday afternoon, and I remember it was dubbed; the original was either in Aramaic or Hebrew or another language. And I remember how unhappy and angry the Jesus character looked every time I watched. He seemed to be a very grumpy and sullen actor, portraying Jesus.

But that left a fairly strong impression on me: thinking that if I had seen Jesus, I would have seen a fairly sour and unhappy face. Many years later, I saw some very different portrayals of Jesus, but more importantly, I came to faith in Christ, and understood what Jesus was like from the Word.

In truth, if we want to know what Jesus' emotions, or attitudes were, we don't look to movies, paintings, sculptures. The written Word of God gives us the attitudes and affections of Jesus. Yes, we see glimpses of it in the Gospels when we read verses about Jesus rejoicing in spirit, or weeping, or being angry. But actually every time we are commanded to be a certain way in our affections or emotions, we are being told how to be Christlike. And that means we are being told how Jesus was and is.

Because of the worldwide embrace of secular psychology, we tend to have a very unbiblical idea of what we mean when we talk about emotions. Mostly, when people use the word *emotions*, they mean something that happens to you: feelings that you experience, moods you must live through. You are passive, and these feelings happen to you. You feel depressed, or you feel happy, you feel irritable. But these feelings are really not something that you can control, and for that reason, before the 18th century, people used to call them the passions, or the bodily spirits, meaning physical reactions in your body. The ancients even had a theory of bodily fluids that they thought made some people more one way or another, you were wither sanguine, or choleric, or phlegmatic, or melancholic. They may have been wrong about the reason for human temperaments, but they understood correctly that a lot of what we call emotions are found in the body, and have to do with age, sleep, diet, serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin and others.

But the Bible does not command our bodies. It commands our wills, which are in our souls. It does give us commands for our bodies, but it does not command us to feel a certain way in our bodies. Instead, the Bible commands our souls, our hearts, to have certain affections. Affections are not feelings, though you will often feel your affections. But affections are far more than passive feelings. Affections are active choices. They are the choices you make to set your heart in a certain direction, to love, follow, pursue something. These are not entirely under our control, for they require grace. But with that grace present, with God's enablement, we can, and we must have these affections.

Here in Philippians 4:4-7 we have a description, even a summary, of Christian affections. In fact, many commentators have noticed that they are basically the expression of Jewish piety found in the psalms: rejoicing in the Lord, prayer, and thanksgiving. This is Christian piety, Christian devotion, Christian affections. This is how Jesus would have seemed if you had met Him. And therefore, this is how you should seem when people meet you. You and I are Christians, ambassadors of Christ.

God is not commanding you to have a certain mood, or to feel a certain way in your body. He is commanding you to exercise your will in these three directions.

Let's not forget that Paul is writing this to a church that was facing opposition for without, and disunity within. Persecution from pagans, Judaisers and antinomians, and rivalry within the church. To counter both, and in the face of both, Paul calls for a corporate response. These three Christian affections are individual responses but not solely individual response.

So let's consider Paul's three commands for the Christian affections, these three marks of Christlike piety.

I. Choose Devoted Delight

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

Philippians has been no stranger to the word *joy* or *rejoice* – 16 times in this epistle. But now, as Paul draws it to a close, he commands: be joyful in the Lord, and if you missed it, he repeats it.

And it is not the only place. The shortest verse in the Bible in our English Bible is John 11:35 “Jesus wept”, but in the original, the shortest verse is 1 Thessalonians 5:16: Rejoice evermore. That text is very similar to this one: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Or Romans 12:12 ¹²rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; Rejoice, be gentle, pray with thanksgiving.

Now we don't need any explanation of what it means to be joyful, happy, glad, to delight, be pleased, enjoy. Perhaps we should just add that when the Bible says joy, it doesn't mean frothiness, the empty happiness of frivolous people. Nor does it mean joy is without solemnity sometimes. Joy can include a calmness, a seriousness, a serenity. Christian joy is not what Ecclesiastes describes: “For like the crackling of thorns under a pot, So *is* the laughter of the fool.” (Ec 7:6) Hollow, empty, baseless amusement.

What we need to understand is the difference between passive happiness, and active, chosen rejoicing. How do I rejoice when things are not pleasant? The Philippians would have asked that question. They were being increasingly rejected by their Philippian society. They were not wealthy. Their church was experiencing conflict. What was there to be happy in?

But the text tells us. The focus of the joy, the source of the joy is in the Lord. The Lord Himself is where the Philippians are supposed to look for pleasure, for gladness, for happiness, for delight. They are not to look at what is happening to them, their happenstances, their circumstances. They are to look beyond and behind the present moment and there meditate on the Lord. Who He is, what He has done, what He will do. His Word, works, will, power.

And the words are added “always”. In all circumstances. In the circumstances that seem pleasant, and the ones that don't.

Paul is using words that come from the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk lived at a time when injustice was growing in Judah. And when he complained about that to the Lord, he received an answer he didn't want or expect: God was going to judge all this injustice and idolatry by bringing the Babylonians to attack and take Judah into exile. From a circumstantial point of view, what lay

ahead was war, famine, violence and death. But this is how the prophet ends the book:

¹⁷Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls—

¹⁸Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17–18)

And if the Philippians wanted a New Testament example, they needed to look only to how Paul and Silas behaved when they were in Philippi. After being unjustly arrested, and beaten, and put in stocks in jail, we read,

²⁵But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16:25). Nothing in Paul's immediate circumstances was happy, pleasant, delightful. But Paul and Silas chose to rejoice in the Lord.

What do you think Paul and Silas rejoiced in, while their bodies were bent almost double, in terrible physical pain? I picture them rejoicing that suffering for Christ brings reward. I picture them rejoicing that God's hard providences almost always open up more ministry. I picture them rejoicing that when God prunes the vine, it is about to bring forth more fruit. I picture them rejoicing that God was sovereign over Rome, sovereign over Philippian jailers and consuls.

Now, perhaps you say, like I do, that feels very hard to do. When my circumstances are unpleasant, I want to complain to someone, and I want others to agree with my complaint. And when I'm told to rejoice in the Lord, it feels very bitter to me, very impractical, almost harsh. In a strange way, it almost feels like a death, to rejoice in God, when I want to complain about life.

And that it is. To rejoice in the Lord, is to once again, choose the J-curve of dying, denying self, accepting suffering, and looking upward, forward, into the promises and person of God, and choosing to find delight and pleasure there.

And it is one of the works of God to sometimes strip the fruit tree, and empty the bank account, and rack the body, and disappoint the hopes and dreams, and frustrate the worldly ambitions. And there lies the naked choice: live in my selfish, worldliness and complain, or die to this world and this life and find joy in that unchanging, inexhaustible fountain that is God.

You say, "I don't know how to do it." Answer: start doing it. Start aiming your pursuit of happiness in God. Start exploring the person of God. Start meditating on Him, His will, His ways. God has a delightful way of turning off all the taps of pleasure in your life, until you trace the pipes upwards and finally come to drink at the reservoir from where all pleasure actually comes: God Himself. Wean yourself off the dirty water of worldly joy or of complaining, till you thirst for God.

How did Jesus look? He looked and seemed like someone who was always finding delight and pleasure in His Father. He looked like someone whose circumstances were just the thin top layer of reality, and He always had His roots below that in God Himself.

But Christian affections go further than joy.

II. Choose Mild Meekness

⁵Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.

This word translated *gentleness* has produced a huge range of translations: gentleness, graciousness, moderation, forbearance, considerateness. This is because the word is unusual. It actually means, "Not insisting upon every right, or law or custom". Aristotle used the word to describe a person

who does not always demand his rights, but is content to accept a smaller share, even though the law is on his side.

Paul says that pastors are to have this quality, in 1 Timothy 3:3, where it is translated *gentle*. James tells us that the wisdom from above has this quality, where it again is translated *gentle*. But when we hear that word, we might think that it means to speak softly, or to have a non-hostile countenance. But that is not the idea.

Jonathan Edwards helps us immensely with understanding this affection. He wrote “a lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper... is *the* distinguishing disposition of the hearts of Christians”. Edwards uses a number of synonyms for it in his writings: calmness, long-suffering, forbearance, quietness, patience, kindness, lamblike, dovelike, and especially, the word *meekness*. He wrote, “In him who exercises the Christian spirit as he ought there will be no passionate, rash and hasty expression; there will not be a bitter exasperated countenance, or air of behavior, no violence in talk or carriage, but on the contrary, those words and that behavior which savor of peaceableness and calmness.

This kind of gentleness is not a gift of the Spirit to be used at times, but a fruit of the Spirit, a character attribute and affection to have at all times. “The eminently humble Christian is as it were clothed with lowliness, mildness, meekness, gentleness of spirit and behavior, and with a soft, sweet, condescending, winning air and deportment; these things are just like garments to him; he is clothed all over with them.

There is only one place in all four Gospels where Jesus tells us about his heart. Spurgeon said of those verses in Matthew 11: Meekness is a great part of the Christian spirit. Christ in that great call and invitation...calls all that labor and are heavy laden to come unto him, particularly mentions this as that in which he calls upon them who come to him to imitate him. “Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.

This is the idea: the power under control, the refusal to assert all my rights, to be defensive or aggressive, but to have this kind of mild, Christlike moderation, reasonableness, gentleness, mildness, contented control over one's spirit. Someone who instead of fighting life with combativeness, self-protectiveness, demands, retaliation, impatience, this person chooses a contented humility, a satisfied meekness.

Now Paul says, let this be known to all men. Be recognised by this. Let your unbelieving clients, colleagues, family, acquaintances see this unusual dovelike character.

But wait, Paul. Do you mean we give up the fight? Aren't we supposed to be strong, courageous, as we've seen in the life of David? Edwards responds: “The strength of the good soldier of Jesus Christ, appears in nothing more, than in steadfastly maintaining the holy calm, meekness, sweetness, and benevolence of his mind, amidst all the storms, injuries, strange behavior, and surprising acts and events of this evil and unreasonable world.

Again, this is hard. Right. But that is again the message of Philippians. That we must die to our own, natural attitudes, and embrace the attitude of Christ, who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

And for that reason, the Philippians were to do nothing through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself, and each were to look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3–4). If we die to pride, self-defense, self-protectiveness, self-assertion, selfish ambition, fleshly responses, we can rise to Christlike gentleness.

Now as one of the reasons for both this affection and the one to come, Paul includes this words: “The Lord is at hand”. This can mean both, “The Lord is present and near” as in “I am with you always” and it can mean “The Lord is about to return”. But both the promise of His presence, and the promise of His soon return motivate and strengthen these affections. Why should I root my joy and my gentleness and my peace in Him? Because He will strengthen me, and because He will return soon to judge and reward.

What did Jesus look like, seem like? Like someone who always had power over His responses and reactions, who was clothed in a meek, humble, calm spirit without fretful. Someone who was not trying to wrestle life into submission, but who walked calmly through it, as He did over the waves of Galilee. Someone so submitted to the power of God, that He did not have to act strong, He simply was strong. So He could be so mild, so gentle that children flooded into His arms, but so strong He did not flinch before the highest religious and political rulers of Israel.

Rejoicing, meekness, and now comes a third affection.

III. Choose Prayerful Peace

⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Here is a negative command, a positive command, followed by a promise.

The negative. Do not be anxious. Specifically, in no circumstance, in no situation should you waste your time with worry and anxiety. This word for anxious is used both for evil worry and for good care. It simply means to be concerned for, to give attention to. Paul doesn't mean we should never have things we are concerned for, or burdens, or problems we want to solve.

But it does refer to what Jesus keeps referencing in the Sermon on the Mount: to be worried, anxious. There Jesus uses the word worry six times, for people fretting over food and clothing, over shelter, financial security. Importantly, Jesus calls this “O ye of little faith”.

Sinful worry is unbelief. Sinful worry is trying to care for yourself by controlling the circumstances of your life. Luther's advice to Melanchthon who seemed to have a bit too much worry about church affairs “Philip Melanchthon would not do well to attempt the government of this world any longer.” This is at the heart of worry: a God-complex. If I don't worry about it, who will?

As Jesus said, can you by worrying put on weight, put food in your bellies? But when we worry, we behave that way, acting like rolling the problems over in our minds a thousand times will eventually solve them. Instead, when we have worried for an hour, we have usually only taken the problem and complicated it, taken a 50-piece puzzle of a famous building, and converted it into a 3000-piece puzzle of the blue sky.

The word “worry” is derived from an old Anglo-Saxon word meaning to strangle or to choke.

So here is the opposite of worrying: grateful requesting. Make your requests known to God in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Prayer, supplication, thanksgiving are not here to be split into three different forms of prayer. Paul is simply saying: whatever your concerns, pray, bring your concerns to God, ask Him for help, and make sure you do it with thanksgiving.

Grateful requesting: ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God

in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thes 5:17-18)

Why with thanksgiving? Because when you pray with thanksgiving you are genuinely accepting God's will, and trusting Him. When you don't thank Him, you may actually be worrying on your knees. Some Christians worry before God in prayer, and then conclude their worrying with "In Jesus, name, Amen." They then spend the next three hours tossing and turning in their beds. And probably nothing is more enjoyable to Satan than to see a Christian worrying in his or her prayers. But it will be no fun at all to Satan to see you pray, and perhaps sing part of a hymn of thanksgiving, or end with several thank yous and then to sleep peacefully. And if you wake up in the middle of the night, you present the same request to God, and you thank Him. Not for the answer in advance, but for His promises, His perfect will, His love for you.

Remember 1 Peter 5:7 : casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. You ask not because you know the will of God in advance. You ask because He cares for you and will do better than what we request. But why do we have to request it if God already knows? Because God wants our full self-disclosure in His presence. He wants us to perform the act of trusting.

When must we do this? *In everything*: "The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything".

Here is the promise to us if we practice grateful requesting. and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

If you do grateful requesting, then the result will be another affection: peace. You can't choose peace directly, but you can choose the path to peace: prayer with thanksgiving. This affection is the peace of God. God's peace is unique.

²⁷Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (John 14:27)

How is this peace unique? It passes understanding. That means it goes beyond your human ability to figure out your situation and worry it out. It also means that you can have this peace for no earthly reason. When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay. Whether you have peace like a river attending your way, or whether sorrows like sea-billows roll. Whatever your lot, when you live by grateful requesting, you can say, It is well with my soul.

What will this peace do? It will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Your thoughts and desires will be safely kept and protected within the castle walls of Jesus Christ. Your thoughts will not be hunted by anxieties, chased and pursued by worries, assaulted by what-if scenarios, hounded by nightmarish outcomes. Your heart and your mind will be living in the serenity of Jesus Christ, because you have gratefully presented your requests to Him.

³You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You. (Isaiah 26:3)

The Christian has a calmness, a serenity, a settledness, a confidence about the present and the future that is not rooted in circumstance. Just like his joy, and his meekness/reasonableness/ his peace is in Jesus Christ. As the world looks on, it sees someone who seems connected to another world, another life, a different place. It sees someone who is a citizen of another country.

What did Jesus look like, seem like? Like someone who was not tense, fretting, angsty, fussing, nail-biting. Like someone who brought all the concerns to His Father in grateful prayer, and then experienced peace.

Now picture meeting someone whose countenance has a deep seated joy in something beyond and behind circumstances, a pleasure and happiness untethered from this life. Alongside that, He seems to have huge power under the surface, but it is governed by a calm, serene, sweet mildness that does not attack life. He does not have less problems, or less trials, but they seem to go upward in grateful requests, and what comes back is a peace with no earthly explanation. That's what you're looking at in Jesus.

And since you are the only Jesus many people will know, that's what unbelievers are to see in you. Joy, gentle meekness, and the peace that comes from grateful prayer.