

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Epistle, Year A

THE PEACE OF GOD

Philippians 4:1-9

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Paul Jaster

1Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

DIAGNOSIS: Shameful Turmoil

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Shameful Turmoil

A man long on work and short on time rushed to put together a ten-speed bike of foreign manufacture from a do-it-yourself kit. And after several hours of frustration, perspiration, and exasperation, he finally decided to read the directions—which, much to his surprise, were written in JAPANESE! and translated into broken English. And there he was confronted by Instruction #1: “Assemble with peace of mind.” What kind of wisdom is it that suggests that anything in life—even something as simple as a bike—requires peace of mind if it is to be properly assembled and maintained?

There is a lot of turmoil, anger, hatred, and anxiety in the world today...even in the church, as is seen in the spat between two strong leading women, Euodia & Syntyche, in a province renowned for its strong women: Macedonia (the northern part of Greece). This was the point of entry for Paul and the first preaching of Christian gospel into the continent of Europe. And what makes this turmoil particularly shameful is that Euodia and Syntyche both struggled beside Paul in preaching and living the gospel. The world has too many problems of its own for Christians to be fighting and quarrelling with one another.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Dishonorably Dismissing that the Lord is Near

The shameful turmoil in our world today is the result of ignoring, dismissing, or disbelieving that the Lord is near. All Christians have their names written in God’s Book of Life. Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome and received many benefits from their Roman benefactors, so is the church a colony of heaven. The reaction should be one of unity and rejoicing, being of “the same mind in the Lord” (v. 2), not the whining and complaining that might impel other Christians to take sides and divide.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Terminal Unease

The internal anxiety and external strife is not just between two

“sisters,” or two political parties, or between the strong men and strong women who line up opposite each other on every issue. Ultimately, they are between us and God. To reject the peace of God which surpasses all understanding is to reject the God of Peace. And it leaves us missing out on the wholesome benefits Christ brings. Why wait until death for peace of mind, when we could have had it all along in this life through Christ?

PROGNOSIS: Honorable Peace

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Peace of God from the God of Peace

Philippi was the site of several famous battles including the war of Octavian and Mark Anthony avenging the death of Julius Caesar against his assassins, Brutus and Cassius. It was the staging area for Alexander’s grand conquest of the East from Macedonia to Egypt to India, financed by Philippi’s gold and silver mines. Philippi also had long periods of peace and benefited greatly from the Pax Romana (the Roman peace).

But what Paul taught was that the God of Jesus Christ (not Caesar) is a “God of peace” (v. 9) and that, through Christ’s death and resurrection, this God bestows “a peace which surpasses all understanding” (v. 7). And so, a Christian need “not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God” (v. 6). God honors us by adopting us into God’s divine family and giving us all an equal status, which gives no place for shameful spats.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Stand Firm in the Lord

Paul proclaims his standing order to his beloved Christians, which is to “stand firm in the Lord...” (v. 1). Christian joy is based on the nearness of the Lord. And so joy can be present

even in times of hurt and trial. Working together as a team, we are to be gentle (v. 5) in the “work of the gospel” (v. 3), not competitive and combative. We keep on doing the things that we have learned and received, heard and seen in those who proclaim to us the gospel. Things that are true (not fake), honorable (not embarrassing), just (not unfair), pure (not crude and tainted), pleasing (not disgusting), commendable (not disrespectful), worthy of praise (not sarcasm or censure).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Honorable Peace

The antidote to worry, turmoil and anxiety is prayer. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). Amazingly, the phrase “peace of God” (v. 7) is used here and only here in the New Testament.

The word “guard” (v. 7) is a military term that pictures God’s peace as a detachment of soldiers “standing guard over” a city so as to protect it from outside assault. As a Roman colony and a home for many veteran soldiers, Philippi housed such a Roman garrison. God’s peace, like a garrison of soldiers, will keep guard over our thoughts and feelings so that they will be safe against the hurricane-strength waves of worry and anxiety (Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Bible Commentary, pp. 184-185). This makes Philippi, one of Paul’s most beloved cities, his “joy and crown” (v. 1).