

## **Philippians 4:2-9 (1984 NIV)**

### ***Spiritual Discipline of Rejoicing***

#### **Introduction**

It has been said that Christianity is a very joyous faith. Not because life is always smooth and sweet for Christians. It is because the Christian faith ultimately speaks of the resurrection of a living Lord, and not the burial of a dead founder. So, Christians should embody the essence of joyous celebration as they live out their faith.

Using his own experiences in worldwide outreach as examples, Nick Vujicic goes round the world challenging others to examine their perspective and look beyond their circumstances. He stresses the importance of our attitude being the most powerful tool we have at our disposal and illustrates how the choices we make can have a profound effect on our lives and the lives of those around us. Nick meets challenges with his special blend of humour, perseverance and faith.

People whom he meets often asked him this question—“How can you still smile in life?” Why? Because he was born with tetra-amelia syndrome, a rare disorder characterized by the absence of arms and legs.

Most people are born with normal pairs of hands and legs. But are they all also filled with the same joy and zest in life like that of Nick Vujicic?

We worship a living God. When people look at our countenance, do they believe that this is so because we glow with joy, gratitude, and thankfulness? Or do they think that our God is not real because we look downcast with gloom, and our spirits are filled with complaints rather than celebration?

Jesus teaches us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind ...” (Luke 10:27). It is about loving God with our innermost being. To be able to love God with our innermost being, we must first build up a strong inner life. And to build up a strong inner life, we must nurture and exercise certain spiritual disciplines.

When we think of spiritual disciplines, we often think of Bible study, prayer, and Scripture memory. These are important, but I believe there is one other that is even more fundamental to the building up of a strong inner life—i.e. the spiritual discipline of nurturing and exercising from inside out the spirit of rejoicing in the Lord. Without this, we can be doing all the Bible study, prayer, and Scripture memory legalistically as keepers of God’s law and not joyously as lovers after God’s heart.

Today, we look at Philippians 4:1-9. These verses deal with five attitudes that will nurture the spirit of rejoicing in the Christian. The first attitude is that of ...

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## I. Settling Differences (vv. 2-3)

Paul addressed a difficult and delicate problem inside the Philippian church. It seems that two leading women couldn't get along with each other. One was named "Euodia" (meaning "sweet smell") and the other was named "Syntyche" (meaning "friendly"). We don't know much about these women or the precise nature of their dispute. For whatever reason, "Sweet smell" and "Friendly" weren't very sweet or very friendly to each other.

But I find it instructive that Paul didn't give us very much details. We can't tell from his words the background of the problem, and nothing he said let us know who was right and who was wrong. Instead of taking sides, he simply exhorted these two Christian women to settle their differences. That's a useful principle to remember because in most disputes it usually doesn't matter who started it. Once animosity builds up, there is generally plenty of finger pointing and blame shifting.

These two women contended with each other in the Philippian church. The word "contended" in v. 2 means to engage in competition and indicates that these women were strong, determined, hard-working, and probably opinionated. They had their own views of how things should be done.

But instead of focusing on the causes, Paul exhorted these two women to "agree"—which literally means to come to one mind. It doesn't mean seeing eye-to-eye on every detail. Rather, it indicates a personal choice to focus on the things that unite us in Christ.

In his book, "What They Never Told Us About How To Get Along With One Another", Judson Edwards lists six rules for healthy relationships:

- Agree more, argue less.
- Listen more, talk less.
- Produce more, advertise less.
- Confess more, accuse less.
- Laugh more, fret less.
- Give more, receive less.

These are all good advices we need to take to heart. Make every sincere effort to settle differences. If we can't settle them completely, we can at least make an effort in that direction.

The second attitude that will nurture the spirit of rejoicing in the Christian is that of ...

## II. Resolving to Rejoice (v. 4)

Paul's third command in v. 4 is quite simple—"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Though short, this command may be the most difficult one to obey consistently. Note that the command to rejoice is the only

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one that is repeated. Why is that? I believe it's because we tend to forget this one in the midst of dealing with difficult and upsetting problems of life.

When Paul says, "Rejoice always," he's not talking about "putting on a happy face". The rejoicing he has in mind is not based on outward circumstances. That's crucial because our circumstances can be quite depressing.

Where was Paul when he wrote these words? In a Roman prison chained to Roman guards 24 hours a day. He was on trial with no certain hope of release. I take it that Paul didn't "enjoy" being in prison but he found reasons to rejoice even in that difficult circumstance.

When I was hospitalized one Sunday on 10 Jan. 2010 for passing out blood in my stools, I was placed in the high dependency ward. They gave me a couple of blood transfusions and hooked me up to monitor my blood pressure and heart rate on an hourly basis. The doctor did two scope tests for me to look at my upper GIT. But he still could not be sure with his diagnosis. I requested for a colonoscopy. He told me it would not be advisable for me to have it for the time being. I must admit that I became a little unsettled.

And as I was hooked up to all the monitoring equipment and made to lie in bed, I could not walk and even read too much. When you are in that position, you can only look up most of the time. And when you have to look up most of the time, the only thing that God is leading you to do is to reflect and pray.

And as I was reflecting and praying, I remember the message I preached that Sunday—the Lord is there for us, even in the storms of life. I then sensed the Lord calling me to give thanks with joy.

- Give thanks with joy because I could stand at the pulpit and finish my preaching that Sunday before being rushed to the hospital.
- Give thanks with joy because it took me less than two hours after admission to be moved to the ward.
- Give thanks with joy because my fellow patients were so heavily sedated that they didn't make any noise to disturb my sleep.
- Give thanks with joy for the many people who were praying for me.
- Give thanks with joy for those who visited and encouraged me.
- Give thanks with joy that my family members felt the comfort of the Lord at such a time.
- Give thanks with joy that things in church can go on as per normal.

Suddenly, I had so much to give thanks with joy while lying in my hospital bed. When I was discharged one week later, the doctor said to me, "I still cannot be definite with my diagnosis. I would need to see

you again at a later time. Meanwhile, you go home and rest. The bleeding may recur, and if it does, come back immediately.”

Honestly, to leave the hospital after a week with these parting words from the doctor was really not much of an encouragement. But the Lord had helped me to return home from the hospital with a resolve to rejoice and give thanks. And I was blessed with a wonderful time of rest and recuperation at home.

The third attitude that will nurture the spirit of rejoicing in the Christian is that of ...

### **III. Being Gentle in Spirit (v. 5)**

Verse 5 says, “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”

The real test of gentleness comes not when you are around nice people. The real test comes when we are with people who are difficult. Anyone can be gentle around nice people, but we often need the Lord to enable us to respond gently to people who are difficult.

We can celebrate and rejoice with a gentle spirit even in difficult situations and relationships by adopting at least two approaches in life:

- One, be understanding and not demanding. Philippians 2:4-5 in The Living Bible says, “Don't just think about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and in what they are doing.”

Now let me ask you, how do you treat people who provide a service to you? How do you treat the waiter, the receptionist, the sales assistant, and the bank teller? Are you often demanding? Do you understand that they may have a hard day too, or do you only think of being served by them? A good way to develop gentleness is to work at understanding the people who serve us in some capacity in our daily lives.

I believe the first place you can be gentle is at home. The Bible says that wives are to adorn themselves with “a gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:4). The Bible also says to husbands, “You husbands should try to understand the wives you live with” (1 Pet. 3:7). Also, parents are not to exasperate their children, and children are to honour their parents (Eph. 6:1-5). This is mutual understanding that leads to mutual gentleness.

Be understanding rather than demanding, beginning with people whom you live with.

- Two, be gracious and not judgmental. Galatians 6:1-2 says, “If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore

him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” The temptation Paul is referring to in this passage may well be the temptation to be judgmental; to be “holier than thou”.

What’s your reaction to people when they mess up their lives? Do you secretly think, “I told you so,” or “I could see it coming,” or “Very good! Serves you right,” or “How could you be so stupid?” In short, do you react with an inward sense of superiority?

You remember Jesus’ response to the woman caught committing adultery in John 8. He defended her in front of other people and then, after the crowd had left, He dealt with her privately and firmly about her sin—“I will not condemn you, but go and sin no more.” He showed disapproval of her sin. Yet, He was gracious and not judgmental towards her.

Romans 15:7 says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Christ puts up with a lot from us. And if Christ puts up with our inconsistencies and weaknesses, we must learn to put up with others’ shortcomings as well if we are to grow in Christlikeness. Whenever you feel tempted to be ungracious to another person, pause to remember how much God has been so gracious to you.

The fourth attitude that will nurture the spirit of rejoicing in the Christian is that of ...

#### **IV. Praying about Everything (vv. 6-7)**

Verse 6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything ...” To that we often respond, “You must be joking! You know how tough life is today? Come on, be real!”

But it’s actually very good advice. Our worrying can displease God because it assumes that God can’t take care of us. He has promised to care of us, but when we worry, we are saying, “Lord, I don’t believe you can take care of me so I’m going to take matters into my own hands.”

We all have our own concerns that trouble us. It may be health issues, or financial pressures, or a big decision you need to make, or family problems, or marital struggles, or issues at school or at work. But do we know for certain what will happen next? Very often, we don’t. We try to secure certainty for our future as best as we can, yet we can’t be absolutely certain what will happen next.

So, Paul calls on us to pray—pray that we will learn well from the past, live well for the present, and trust Him well for the future; pray that we will not regret the past, we will rejoice in the present, and we will release the future

into His sovereign hands. So, Paul has three pieces of advice for those who worry much here on earth:

- Pray about everything.
- Pray with thanksgiving.
- Pray with expectation.

When we take our burdens to the Lord, He replaces our worries with something much greater—the peace that surpasses all human understanding. Verse 7 says, “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ.”

The peace of God will “guard” our heart. That’s a military metaphor for soldiers guarding the city gate from the inside. When you pray, God’s peace becomes a guard on your heart, protecting you from the cares of the world that could otherwise distract, distress, and even destroy you.

Lastly, the fifth attitude that will nurture the spirit of rejoicing in the Christian is that of ...

## **V. Thinking God-Pleasing Thoughts (vv. 8-9)**

Verse 8 says, “Finally, brothers, 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.”

The rationale behind Paul’s words is simple—sin always begins in the mind and so does holiness. When Paul says, “Think about such things,” the command is in the Greek present tense—i.e. “think and keep on thinking about these things”. Find what is true and think about it. Find the lovely and think about it. Find the virtuous and think about it. Do it and v. 9 says, “... And the God of peace will be with you.”

My mother was stricken with immobility when she suffered a stroke in 2004. She became distressed and this in turn led her to be negative in her feelings and behaviour. Sadly, not many of our close relatives visit her when she was in such a state of body, mind, and spirit. They found it so stressful to talk and interact with her in her negativism.

In the same way, when we cannot extricate ourselves from the cycle of negative thinking, we often end up feeling and behaving negatively. This in turn undermines our relationships with the Lord and other people.

God wants us to renew our minds in the sense of changing our negative thoughts into God-pleasing thoughts. And we can seek Him to help us do this. Then we can worship and serve Him with God-pleasing feelings and actions, and attract others to come to Him as well.

## Conclusion

Paul's exhortation is simple—"Hold on to Jesus! Think about Him! Rest in Him! Live in Him!" When Jesus Christ reigns in your heart, you will work to ...

- Settle your differences.
- Resolve to rejoice.
- Be gentle in spirit.
- Pray about everything.
- Think God-pleasing thoughts.

These are the five attitudes that will enable you to celebrate and rejoice in your inner being. There is much bitterness, resentment, anger, impurity, dishonesty, selfishness, greed, pessimism, and despair in the world. And a Christian exuberating with celebration and rejoicing in the midst of all these will certainly be a refreshing witness in the world.

Let me close by suggesting three demonstrations of Christian rejoicing in our daily life:

- One, demonstrate gratitude. First Thess. 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." That's the attitude of gratitude. Notice again that we don't have to be thankful FOR all circumstances, but we are to be thankful IN all circumstances.

The Bible tells us that God in Christ has given us an abundant life. But we often think of abundance in the consumerist sense of the word. In our consumerist world today, abundance can be so relative. What was abundant in 1970 may not be so today. What a rich man view as abundance may not be so when he compares himself with someone like Bill Gates. And the consumerist world is always enticing us to go for the good life, alluring us with choices that promise newer and better things all the time.

When there are so many attractive choices, it is very difficult to be faithful and committed to anything (or even anyone) for long. I mean it is very difficult to be grateful for the 5-year-old computer I have now for too long if the market is constantly offering products that promise to be newer, better, and even cheaper.

So, the vast array of choices before us tempts us to be short-term in our commitment, in our loyalty, and in our faithfulness. People are always tempted to change brands, companies, friends, and even marital partners in a short span of time. At the spiritual level, we can be tempted to change our allegiance from the one true God to other so-called gods (i.e. idols) so that we can lay our hands on the good life soonest possible.

But God has promised more than just the good life. In fact, He has given us the best life we can ever have—He has given us the abundant life in Christ. All that belong to Him, He has given to us in Christ which transcend the material and the here-and-now. Never try to gain all that the world has to offer, and end up losing what God has for you in Christ. So, let's celebrate and rejoice in what we already have in life rather than gripe and grumble about what we don't have.

Look for ways to express gratitude this week. Maybe write a note expressing appreciation to someone for his friendship. Or make a phone call to tell someone how much he has meant in your life. And don't forget to express gratitude to God. If you're not a joyful person, start singing hymns of praise to God.

- Two, demonstrate giving. Jesus teaches us that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Why? It's because we are most like God when we give, and God does not give to us grudgingly.
- Three, demonstrate service. Give your life to helping others. Paul reminds us, "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Eph. 6:7-8). The happiest people are usually too busy serving and helping others to ask themselves, "Why am I not happy?"

Joy comes as we get our focus off ourselves and concentrate on helping others. There are probably lots of areas of service in our church just waiting for someone like you to fill them. What can you do to help out? As you go through life each day, don't keep complaining, "Why no one is serving me?" Rather, make this your often-asked question to people you meet each day, "How can I serve you today?"

Noted Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe wrote a book called "Victorious Christians". In one chapter, he wrote about a woman who was the author of over 8,000 songs. In fact she wrote so many that she had to write under pseudonyms just so she could get more of her songs into the hymnbooks.

At six weeks of age, this woman developed a minor eye inflammation and was taken to a local doctor for treatment. However, the doctor who treated her used the wrong medicine on her eyes and she became totally and permanently blind because of his carelessness.

Interviewed years later, she said she harboured no bitterness against the physician. In fact, she said, "If I could meet him now, I would say thank you, over and over again for making me



blind.” She felt that her blindness was a gift from God to help her write the hymns that flowed from her heart through her pen.

How could she, blinded by a tragic failure of a careless doctor, still be filled with such joy and power in her songs? It is because she kept her heart focused on God. She looked up towards God rather than at her disability and weaknesses. As with Paul, she was convinced that she could do all things through Christ who gave her strength.

Many of her songs and hymns of joy we still sing today in our churches. Her name was ... Fanny Crosby.

(<https://www.family-times.net/illustration/Bitterness/202431>)

Today, many people are grumbling rather than showing gratitude for what is already in their hands, and many are complaining rather than celebrating what they already achieved in life.

Rejoicing in the Lord from inside out is our way of loving Him with our spirit (our innermost being) here on earth.

Pray that the Lord will help us nurture and exercise the spiritual discipline of rejoicing as a pattern in our daily life ... for this is what we will be doing eternally in God’s Eternal Kingdom. Amen!