December 14/15, 2013

Christmas: Worship More, Worry Less

Philippians 4:4-9

Pastor Josh Luse

Narrator:

> **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**
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> **Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.** (*NASB, Philippians 4:4-9)

(Josh Luse): So easy to hear these words and then quickly let them pass. It's so easy in this season to have it come and then quickly pass. I wonder what words you think of when you think of the Christmas season—maybe love, joy, peace, hope, sales, fifty percent off, chaos, madness… Maybe you think of Black Friday, Cyber Monday, or Shopping Sunday…I made that one up, but I get the royalties if it sticks. *(laughter)* It's just Christmas in America has become this crazy thing every year. It's shop, shop, shop. It's credit cards; it's traffic jams; it's long lines; it's to-do lists—and oh yeah, it's Jesus too. This past week my wife and I were getting ready for some friends to come to our house and I hear from the other room, as my wife's straightening things up—we just have gotten our Christmas decorations up—and I hear her say, "Jesus is missing!" And it kind of catches me off guard. But then she comes, "Josh, I can't find Jesus!" Now I've been a pastor for a while, and hearing your wife say she can't find Jesus is a concerning thing. *(laughter)* So I go into the other room and sure enough, Jesus is missing out of the nativity set. But it's okay; we find Him up in my daughter's room in her doll house, just having all sorts of delightful desserts along with Strawberry Shortcake and the rest of the gang. *(laughter)* But it's so easy in this time to go through this and realize that you've missed Jesus throughout the whole thing. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not a guy that's up here trying to say that we need to take back Christmas. I'm not trying to get you to put more plastic nativity sets up all around town. That's not exactly what I'm saying. But what I am saying is this: That every day matters, and maybe even especially in this season it would be a great opportunity to celebrate—enjoying with Jesus—to share this beautiful story of good news! Maybe right now would be a beautiful opportunity to share this hope for this Savior that we've waited for so long. Rick McKinley says it this way: "Missing out should feel familiar; most of us habitually miss it every year at Christmas. Our story is consumption and consumerism, and we are obsessed with the climax. We worship less. We spend more. We give less...and we worry more."

Well, today I want to talk a little bit about that. As we enter into this Advent season, we realize that it's rich with tradition. There're all sorts of things that surround this time. Advent itself—this word that means there's an arrival—it's this anticipation of the coming of this person or this thing or this event. And for us, we realize this signifies the celebration of this coming of this Person that people had waited centuries for. Now as they waited for this—there's a Creator of the cosmos, the One who put the stars in the sky, the One who created the galaxies, space, time, our world—everything

came through the womb of an unwed teenage girl in a humble stable to save the world. I believe that that first Christmas changed the world forever.

Our Advent theme traditionally this week is that Jesus is God. Other traditional calendars would call this week of Advent the week of joy or rejoicing. I don't know what it is that you come into this room with this morning, but I want you to know you can rejoice. We sing about it all the time. We sing, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel" or we sing, "Good Christian men, rejoice with heart and soul, and voice; Give heed to what we say: News! News! Jesus Christ is born today." So I'd love to invite you to turn to Philippians 4. I'd like to have you stop, take a moment to reflect, realize no matter what it is you carry into this place, no matter what it is that weighs in on you that you, too, can celebrate. Would you start with just a word of prayer with me?

> *Father, thank You for times like this where we can stop, we can take a breath, we can remember what truly matters. Father, I don't know what's going on in the lives of everyone in this room but, God, I know that You do. And I know that You meet us here. God, I also know that Your words are powerful. So, God, as we take time this morning to reflect, would You also give us the power to respond? We want to walk away from this gathering of people, excited to live this out this week. So we ask for Your Spirit to guide us now. We pray this in Jesus' Name. Amen.*

Now let's take a look at this Philippians, Chapter 4. I'm going to start in verse 4. And it says this:

> **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!**

Now if we stop right there for a second and think of this word **rejoice**, it actually comes from a Greek word, *chairo*, which its root word is *charis*; maybe you've heard of this—*grace, a gift*. So it's the idea that this gift, or rejoicing in your joy, is something that we're to be aware of, something that we're to be conscious of. But not only just be aware of it and conscious of it, it's something even more; it's the fact that we are supposed to rejoice; we're supposed to delight in God's gift of grace. We're supposed to experience this gift of grace. This **rejoice** word is a verb so it has all sorts of ways that it plays out around us. Just think of it for just a bit. How could you rejoice? You could rejoice in a lot of situations that you are in. You could rejoice in a lot of things that you get. There are also moments every day where you can rejoice. You can revel in what God's done. You can eat a good meal and rejoice in that meal. You can see a sunset and rejoice in that sunset. You can spend time with friends and revel, rejoice in that time with friends. Warren Wiersbe says it this way, "Worship is all that I am—mind, soul, body and spirit—responding to all that God is, says and does." It's my celebration. My rejoicing is not just in these things that I get satisfied in. They are in this thing that is constant, that is forever, that does not change. It's in the Lord. So as I learn to rejoice in the Lord, it's not this fake thing, where even though I don't truly feel grateful or experience joy, I'm going to say this anyway. It's rooted in this experience of what I know in my relationship with the Lord, with Jesus. And it turns everything into opportunities to trust and respond and rejoice.

But he also adds in this word which I kind of wish wasn't there because it makes life a little bit harder it seems. **Rejoice in the Lord *always***. What if he could have left that out? Because then that will be easier; that goes along with what I typically do. I'll rejoice in the Lord when things are good, when things go my way. But when things don't, I'll wait till they go back my way again. But that's not what he says here. He says: **Rejoice in the Lord always.** Then he repeats it again—**again I will say, rejoice!** It's as though he feels the need to remind us that this isn't conditional.

When I lose my job, God is good. When I'm having relational problems, God is enough. When the bottom drops out of my world, God will get us through. My youth pastor used to always say that worship is the proper response in any situation. I believe that to be true. I know that because I've seen people this year, in this church, live this out—people that have gone through difficult things, through experiences that none of us would ever long for or wish upon even those that are our enemy. Yet, through the valley, through the difficulty, I've witnessed them rejoice in God, that this God is good—and it's a beautiful thing to watch. It's not as though the guy writing this is just making up something that sounds good. We know that Paul is writing these words from prison and he's very aware of his situation because he's on death row. He's faced torture; he's faced persecution, which leads ultimately to his execution. But even more aware of that, he's aware of this reality that he can still, in the midst of that, rejoice. The reality is this good news of Jesus that he understands, that God calls him friend, that God has invited him to join into this story of hope, this restoration that is so much bigger than him—and yet he gets to be a part of it. Paul says, **Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice!** Then he moves on to verse 5, and he says:

Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

Now this is a verse that guys love to hear. "Hey, what you've been doing this week?" "I've been working out." "Oh yeah? Cool!" "What you've been doing?" "I'm working on my gentle spirit." *(laughter)* It just doesn't quite roll the same way. So we look at this, and we are like, "Okay, maybe gentle spirit; I'll pass on by that." But maybe it's helpful to know that **gentle spirit** here is this *reasonableness*; it's this *forbearance*, this *kindness*. It's this fact that I'm working along with other people. It's this fact that I'm considerate in all that I do. I heard a pastor give an illustration that I thought would fit well with this:

I'm going to give you some hypothetic situations, and then I'm going to ask you at the end of it what I should do. And I would love for you to tell me that I should just, "Let it go," that I should practice this gentle spirit and just let it go. Okay? Are you with me on this? So let's try this out a little bit. So, hypothetically—these may be hypothetic or not; I don't know; you'll figure it out. Hypothetically this last week, I may be standing in a line for approximately eleven minutes while I'm waiting to get up to pay for these items that I have. As I get up to the counter to finally pay, this nice store clerk tells me that they are flipping off their lane because it's time for their break and that I can just move on to the next lane to pay for my items, which would probably be another good eleven minutes. What do you think I should do in that situation? (A few in the audience: "Just let it go.") Okay, good, you are starting to get this. We will get this a little bit more.

So, hypothetically, I'm out this past week; it's about three hundred degrees below zero in Nebraska *(laughter)* and I'm shoveling my driveway and my sidewalk. And as I'm shoveling my driveway and my sidewalk, I just about get finished when my neighbor comes up with this souped-up new snow blower and he starts to just cruise through his driveway and sidewalk, nicely spraying his snow right onto my freshly-scooped sidewalk and driveway, to which I get to respond—in three hundred degrees below zero—and scoop my driveway again. What do you guys think I should do in this situation? (More audience: "Just let it go.") Okay, some of you think I should let that go.

Alright. I'll give you one more, just to see if you are tracking with me on this. Afterwards, we'll all respond, "Just let it go." I go down to the basement, and I find that my wife has sold my coveted eight-point deer head that's been mounted on the wall, hypothetically, from my first hunting trip with my father, hypothetically, on Craigslist for ten dollars, hypothetically. Now what do you think I should do in this situation? (More audience: "Let it go.") No! There are some things you should

not let go. There are some things that just crossed the line—that your gentle spirit does not need to let go. *(laughter)* Now I actually am not a hunter, but if I was, I shouldn't let that one go.

Actually, we were told to let our gentleness and our gentle spirit be *known to all*. So I don't get to really choose those things that I want to hang on to, those things that I want to be a little more difficult, those things where I don't want to display grace. In fact, I'm called to let my gentle spirit be known to all...why? Because **the Lord is near**. Because we are part of something bigger, because we've experienced God's grace and because of this, we are able to offer this to others all around us. Now this is a relational thing. Earlier in this chapter Paul talks about relational conflict and problems between people, and it's not like in the next week or two you are going to be maybe around family or people that will give you an opportunity to practice having a gentle spirit. But the thing is, if we are going to let our gentle spirit be known to all, we can redeem that time, that moment, that opportunity. Because it says that God, t**he Lord is near**. It's talking about His presence, but even more than that, it speaks to the fact that He's coming again soon. Long ago they waited, anticipating for the Savior to come to save the world. And He was born, lived a sinless life, died on a cross and rose again to which then He ascends to heaven. But He is coming again. And this motivates me that every day matters, that every moment matters. Then he goes on to transition here a little bit. He goes to verse 6, and he says this:

> **Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**

Now the word **anxious**, or worry, it's kind of interesting. We get our word worry from an old English word that means *to strangle*. When I think of this, I think of a plant that I've planted and then weeds come up and start to strangle and choke it out to the point that they will kill it—because worry and anxiety are exactly that. They start to tear us up; they start to strangle us until they try to take complete control. Alicia will actually speak to this in this video:

(Alicia in the video): *There's this author Thomas Keppler who tells the true story of a lady who realized that worry was controlling her life, wrecking it really. She wanted a way to get control back. So to do that, she did something a little extreme. She made a list, and then every single time she felt worried, she wrote down exactly what she was worried about. The more she did this, the more she was able to recognize patterns so she could categorize them. She did this for a year and then she made a chart. The chart showed that almost everything she was worried about—ninety-two percent—was completely outside of her control. Forty percent were things she had no control over anyway; there was nothing she or anybody else can do to change them. Thirty percent was water under the bridge—stuff that had already happened—she couldn't change those things either. Twelve percent were other people's opinions of her which she thought were mostly unfair, untrue—in other words, not really worth worrying about. Ten percent was about her health—she did have some health problems—but, like most of us know, worrying is actually bad for your health, so worrying about her health only made it worse. And the other eight percent she called legitimate. The eight percent were real problems and she could do something about them. The story may not tell us anything new; most of us know that worrying isn't exactly helpful. But what is interesting is that we can all relate to this woman.*

We can all relate with her because we all struggle with things—money, jobs, school, relationships, health, family. We all have things that we worry about. What is it that you struggle to worry about? What is it that right now, as I speak, starts to conjure up this thing, "Oh, yeah, I forgot about that; I'd better start worrying about it some more." It starts to take space in your mind. In this verse Paul

says to **be anxious for nothing**. He continues to use these big words: **rejoice always**; **be anxious for nothing**. Why? Because He's a big God. He can take care of big things in our life. He can take care of everything in our life. What he's not saying here is that we are just supposed to not care about anything. He's not saying that we are supposed to be just apathetic, because concern is obviously a good thing. There's a difference between concern and anxiety. Concern is love and care and concern for someone else. Anxiety is just worry that allows me to do nothing. Concern allows me to take action. Paul tells us earlier in Philippians that he was concerned for the welfare of people in Philippi. We know that God was concerned for us so much that He sent His Son to be our Savior and He continues to show us this in tons of ways how He loves us and His concern for us.

So we know that we can be concerned for others. In fact, as a church, we deeply think that this is something that's important, so much so that during this time, this season, we set up something called *Help for the Holidays* because we want to be a church that's concerned about those that are around us. It's real easy during this season to just turn inward and focus on ourselves. Some of you may know, years ago, my wife and I, mostly my wife, started a magazine. It actually continued to grow and spread across the states and we started shipping some overseas. So as it was growing, we thought, what are some ways we can actually use this to do something even more? It was a magazine for people with food allergies and had lots of recipes and pictures and things like that. So we were helping in that way. But we thought, as the holiday issue was coming up, what if we could actually use that to bring some awareness to issues that were going on? We had a friend that was working with human trafficking and the restoration, the rescue of girls and that, also helping to eliminate that problem. So we thought, what if we put an article right in the middle of this holiday issue and we explain things to help people be aware but also to invite them in to be a part of helping to stop this. You would be amazed at the letters we got in response to this. And it wasn't letters like, "This is great! I want to jump on board." It was letter saying, "I don't want to see this while I'm preparing for Christmas, while I'm preparing for the holidays, as I'm flipping through delicious recipes and pictures of food, I don't want to be seeing problems in the world around me because I'd much rather just ignore it, pretend it's not there, not be a part of it."

He's not saying we are to be apathetic. But he's saying that instead of worrying about it, we can take it to someplace else. Yes, there are things we can do about some of the things we are concerned, we are worried about. Other times, seems like there's not a response but yet there is. He tells us here in verse 6:

> **Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**

Let's just think a little bit about this. **In everything**, he tells us some things that we are supposed to do. First of all, he tells us to pray. Now prayer in here is not just we are talking to God. It has these tones of adoration, as an offering that we are bringing to God. It has this idea of worship. So as I bring my requests to God, I worship Him; I adore Him. It's like this song that we sing, "O come let us adore Him". It's realizing that He is God; He is big enough. Because of that, I can worship You; I can give You these worries that I have. But not only that, he says, **supplication**; this is *sharing our needs*. So as I worship God in this prayer, I'm also sharing these things that are weighing on my heart. Then he says this other word, **thanksgiving**. Now it's really interesting; I think he should say, "As you come to pray, give your request and then, when it's answered, then be thankful," right? But he doesn't. In fact, he says, thanksgiving or gratitude needs to be a part of this prayer. It doesn't seem like it makes sense, but yet, it really does. Because it involves trust; it involves believing that God is big enough that I can trust Him with this, so I can be grateful. It

involves appreciation. One of the greatest thoughts on the idea of appreciation that I've read is by an author named G. K. Chesterton. And this is what he said at the end of one of his days, "Here ends another day, during which I've had eyes, ears, hands, and the great world around me. Tomorrow begins another day. Why am I allowed two?" Prayer comes with appreciation, but it also comes with trust. He says **let your requests be made known to God**. I think about that too; I think, but God already knows, doesn't He? Doesn't God know everything? Yes, God knows everything, but He needs you to know that He knows. I believe that prayer helps us realize that. It helps us to understand that God knows that I can trust Him, that He's big enough. Isaiah 26, verses 3 and 4 say this:

> **You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.**
>
> (*NIV, Isaiah, 26:3-4)

He's someone that I can depend on. He's someone that I can trust in. So I wonder this morning: Are you trying to be God, or have you realized that you can trust Him with these concerns that are in your life? God wants you to change in exchange your worry with His peace. Verse 7 he says:

> **And the peace of God,** *(and peace, is assurance; it's trust that what God is doing is best.)* **which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

When he uses this word **guard**, it's a beautiful picture. It's this military term of *soldiers encamped all the way around me*. It's not saying that there's not conflict that's going on. This **peace** is telling me there're soldiers encamped all the way around me so that even as there's conflict going on, at night I can sleep because these soldiers are around encamped, protecting me. Think what this **peace** could do in your life. Think of what trust in God could do as you lay your head down at night and you think through the day, and you think through all these things that are going on, realizing you can trust God with it. You can give God your worries. It's a beautiful thing. It's an incredible thing. The word **peace** in the Old Testament in Hebrew is the understanding of this *wholeness*, this *presence of wholeness*, this *completeness*. I believe that's a beautiful picture as we realize the trust and our completeness in Christ.

So he started out telling us what to do. Then he moves on, tells us what not to do. And I want to finish here this morning with what he tells us again what we should do. Verse 8 he says this:

> **Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.**

So he goes through another list of words, tells us to **dwell on these things**, to think on these things. The first word that he brings up in this list is **true**. Now true is *truth*. It's these things that I'm thinking in my mind that are truth, because often times, the things that are going through our minds are lies. How many lies do I believe all the time—about where my value comes from, about what contribution I'm making in the world, about who I am, about what others think about me? I dwell so much on these hypothetical things and these lies, that I miss out on truth. And it affects the way that I respond and react, the ways that I live. So truth is what I'm thinking about myself.

Now if that's truth, then **what is honorable** or noble is what I'm thinking about others. It's this idea, not that I'm naïve, but that I'm going to *hold others in the highest possible opinion of them that I can*. Now there are people that are very difficult that are in your lives, I'm guessing. But even those people, you could hold them in the highest possible regard. "Man, I know that they're going to do a great job with…" Well, I don't know if they're going to do a great job with this but I know that God could allow them to do a great job. "I know that this person is important…" Man, it's hard sometimes to think this person is important but I know that God thinks this person is truly important. "I know they mean well…" It seems like sometimes they don't mean well. But they could mean very well. I know that God sees them and loves them. I know that he wants me to love them. It's holding them in the highest possible opinion that I could.

What is **right** is *what is just*; it reflects God's heart and His standards. Now these things that he's listed here are things that we think about. And if these three things are things we think about, then the others are things that we are supposed to be attracted to—things that are **pure**, *morally pure*, things that are **lovely**, that are *acceptable*, that are *admirable*, that are *agreeable*, these things that I long for this to be a part of my life for others to see this in me, these things **of good repute**, things *worth talking about*. Then he goes on to say that if there's any **excellence**, anything **worthy of praise**, we are supposed to think about these things, **dwell on these things**.

Now we can say that universally there are things that no matter who you are or what you believe, you are going to look at it and say, "That is just wrong. I don't care who you are, when I see that, that is wrong." There are also things that, universally, no matter what you believe, when you look at it, you say, "That is good. There's something excellent in that. There's something that's worthy of praise." He's telling us instead of having our minds spend so much space and time on this worry, to get that out through prayer, and replace it with these beautiful things. Our thoughts are powerful, even though they cannot be seen or weighed. Ultimately, they become what we do.

Verse 9 he goes on to say:

> **The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.**

These things you've learned and seen and received, these things that he's doing, because he doesn't want them just to be this thing that stays in our mind. He wants it to come out through the things we live, the things that we do.

What if this Christmas season could be different? What if it just wasn't filled with all the chaos and worry, like other Christmases? What if I could rest and rejoice in who this God is and I could practice these beautiful things that are flowing through my mind? If I think about it, maybe this season, I could pray—not only just pray for the things that I'm concerned about and worried about in my own life, but maybe I can start to look around and see things in our city that I can be praying for, see people in the city and in this church that I could be lifting up, to see things around the world that I spend time praying about. Maybe I could even gather my family in to pray about these things.

Our gifts—every year in this country, in America, we spend 450 billion dollars on Christmas—450 billion! What if we could be a little bit more intentional with those gifts? What if the gifts I give weren't just things that I buy and send, and that's it? What if they are tied to time with me—a way I can spend time with these gifts? What if I could spend a little bit less and maybe create some gifts that are meaningful and give those? And with that money that I've not spent, I can spend it on

helping the needs around me. Several years ago in our church in Colorado, we started talking about this, and families started getting these magazines of gifts that they could buy for third world countries, to help with development—fresh water, or a goat for a community—and families would come together and their kids would gather up and they'd decide what they wanted to buy as a family. It's a beautiful way to practice this.

My son one night was sitting at the table years ago when I was trying to get him to finish his plate. As I was saying, "Asher, come on; eat your food." I said, "Asher, there are kids in other countries around the world that are starving that would love your food." Well, it's kind of one of those moments when it backfires. I don't know if you as a parent, you've ever had this. But his eyes kind of get a little bigger, and he goes, "Well, we should send him it." So I had to back a bit, "Well, we can't send him it. By the time it gets there, it'll be rotten and there's all these different things." But just that realization of the need that was there started to get his mind thinking on these things that are beautiful, good, and noble. And then he goes, he finishes all his food, goes into his room, he comes back out with his piggy bank and he says, "Dad, how much would it cost me to give food to the kid that's hungry?" He starts asking these questions, "What's it like?" And I start to paint this picture of a third-world country, these typical settings. So he gets his money, and I give him this amount for one meal; he pulls it out from his piggy bank. He goes back to his room; he comes back out; he goes, "Dad, does that kid have shoes?" I said, "You know, a lot of those kids don't have shoes." He said, "How much would it take to buy shoes for this kid?" This is coming from a five year-old. He continues to go on, "Dad, how many shirts do I have? He needs to have this many shirts." And he's grabbing these handfuls of change, and we're putting it into an envelope; I'm writing it down. And he continues to come out, and he goes, "Dad, does he need a ceiling fan?" ...because he has a ceiling fan in his room. *(laughter)* I said, "I don't think he really needs a ceiling fan." So he goes into his room; we put him down for bed, and my wife and I sit there and we start talking, and we start realizing we have to do something now. We start to get on the internet, and we find an organization that matches this scenario that we've painted. Because of my son, we started to take on this person, this young kid across the country that we can invest into every month.

What if your gifts this year came with some incredible meaning? What if it came with this action? What if, in all of it, was an opportunity to rejoice...because the God of peace will join you in it? I believe that years ago the Savior of the world came as this tiny baby into this world and changed it forever because He was God. I believe that God still invites us in this season to join Him and be a part of change in people's lives forever.

God, may we be a church that loves You and that rejoices in You no matter the situation because of our trust in who You are. Father, may we be a church that runs to You with these things that weigh us down and worry us. God, may we be a church right now that is releasing these things to You. Father, may we be a church that because of these incredible, noble, and right and just and pure and lovely and things that are of good repute flowing through our minds, are able to creatively do beautiful things around us in this city that we live, and this world where You put us. God, may we be a church that rejoices in You, that turns our eyes to You every day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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