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## Living the Jesus Life: Be the Church, Part 2

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TEXT: Philippians 4:6-9 (ESV)

...do not be anxious about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

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Dear friends:

Years ago, a book came on the market that influenced me as a pastor leading a congregation. It was Rick Warren's "The Purpose Driven Church". What struck me was his emphasis on building a healthy congregation. He said the issue is church health, not church growth. If your church is healthy, it will grow naturally. Healthy churches are productive in fulfilling God's purposes. As healthy grapevines produce fruit, so also healthy churches will bear fruit to the glory of God. I took that to heart. Jesus made these statements to his disciples, by the way, at His final instructions the night before He was crucified. He said, "By this, my Father is glorified; that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." Then He went on to say, "You did not choose me. I chose you and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit." That fruit that He's talking about is people being led to a saving relationship with Christ, and people being

discipled in the church to live out the great commandment of loving God and neighbor, carrying out the great commission of making more disciples. That's fruit that glorifies God.

In last week's message, we saw the apostle Paul coaching believers in Jesus Christ as to how to build and maintain a healthy, fruit-bearing church. In verses 2-5, he teaches us first that healthy churches are filled with believers who value and promote unity, who rejoice in the Lord, and are known for their gentleness to all. While Paul continues his instruction in today's passage on how we as believers can make that happen with God's help in our church community, that instruction can be summarized in four words. The first one is "pray". Second, "preoccupy". Third is "practice", and then "promise".

First of all, pray. Paul says a healthy church is a church that has learned where its power and peace come from. Listen to these words again: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." There is so much to worry about these days, that's for sure. The world's at war with a virus that's killing so many, as well as hurting our world's economy and causing job losses and financial crises; and social distancing has caused all sorts of headaches for educational institutions and families. And during this time, as well, many churches are feeling stressed (financially as well as emotionally) as people have been unable to meet together for safety reasons. And then the leaders of these churches are trying to figure out how to continue the congregation's ministry of carrying out the great commission and great commandment during these difficult times. Overall, life is difficult and that can cause worry for us.

Paul tells us: "Don't worry, pray about everything." Instead of being bogged down with anxiety and the worry of the day, pray; hand it over to God. Humbly declare your dependence on Him. Admit to yourself and to God that you can't face life and its difficulties on your own strength and ingenuity. When worries are killing your hope tell God you're at the end of your rope. You see, God loves you and he is attracted to weakness.

Paul uses three words to describe right praying. He says the first word's "prayer," and this word carries with it the idea of approaching God with a worshipful attitude, with adoration and devotion. We must first see God's greatness and majesty before we bring our needs. We remind ourselves of how big and able He really is to solve our problems.

The second word is “supplication,” which describes an intense and serious sharing of our needs and problems with God. Not a half-hearted conversation, but a sincere, heartfelt, laying everything out before God and asking for His help; like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane before He went to the cross.

And the third word is “thanksgiving.” We pray with thanksgiving to him. We thank him for the privilege of prayer and His faithfulness in always answering prayer. And we thank Him for all He's given us. And we especially thank Him for the love He's given us in Christ Jesus. You know, He loves you so much, friend, that He gave His son to die for you and raised Him from the dead in order to rescue you for a relationship with Him. Jesus suffered separation from God at the cross so that you wouldn't have to. So with Jesus in your life, you can approach God about anything; He's your loving father. In another letter, Paul writes about praying through hard times when he says, “What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give all things?”

Maybe you've heard the old saying, “why worry when you can pray?” Well, it's God's gift, prayer, to His people, but it's meant to be used. I'm reminded of a book I read a long time ago by Pastor Jim Cymbala entitled “Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire”. Pastor Cymbala was pastoring the Brooklyn Tabernacle Church in New York. And early on in his ministry described himself and his ministry as “broken and hopeless”. The church was in shambles, people were fighting with one another, the usher was stealing from the offering plate. No one was really being led to Jesus in that tough community with drug dealers and addicts and prostitutes walking the streets. Totally broken and despairing, Cymbala took a break away from his church for a few days, and during that time, he says God spoke to him and God said to him, “Teach my people to pray.” He went back to his church and announced to them that the emphasis in their church from now on was going to be on those Tuesday evening prayer meetings. He told them that only God could help them to be a healthy and effective church for Jesus Christ. There happened to be a guest who was there that day, an Australian pastor, and in response to Cymbala's announcement, he stood up and said to the congregation, “You can tell how popular a church is by who comes on Sunday morning. You can tell how popular the preacher or evangelist is by who comes on Sunday night. You can tell how popular Jesus is by who comes to the prayer meeting.”

Well, they took it to heart and began to fervently call upon the Lord in prayer, and the prayer meeting grew in numbers, and God answered, and the rest is history. God has done a mighty work in Brooklyn through that congregation. Prostitutes and addicts and all kinds of broken people have been brought to Christ. It's an amazing story of what will happen when the church gets on its knees and depends on God in prayer. (By the way, I do recommend that book to you.)

Pray for your church, for their leaders, for the mission and ministry, for new ideas to carry out ministry, for opportunities to reach others with the good news, for unity, and peace, and spiritual numerical growth, for God's help in overcoming obstacles that are standing in the way of your church, and faith and confidence and joy to grow in your community of faith, and pray for members who are hurting, and for those who are outside the faith as well, and for problems that seem insurmountable; that God's will be done in your church, beginning with you.

And of course, you come dependently to Him. Pray for your own personal struggles and circumstances. You make your request known to Him as well for yourself. And there are promises that come with that kind of praying, Paul tells us. He says, "The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." In other words, you'll have God's peace in you. He'll help you to hold it together, no matter what the situation.

And friends, this isn't just theory. This is Paul talking from personal experience. Paul prayed. He knew who is in charge. You never forget that. And so he constantly prayed. Think of it: he went through a lot in his life with Jesus Christ, and he always seemed to stay calm and peaceful, and in his letters he talks of its constant prayer life. And he's always asking for others to be praying for him and his efforts. Paul built his life on prayer, and that's how he experienced God's peace and power in his life.

He says a deep-seated peace guards your hearts and minds. That word "guard" gives us an image of a military soldier, a sentry, keeping watch over you. Your sentry is God Himself, drawing near, reminding you that He's in charge and you are not in this world alone. Prayer protects you, keeps your heart and mind from going into a tailspin. I've experienced that promise lately in my own life. My father passed away in April and I was not able to get back home to be with my sister and have a service for dad until late

May; it was stressful. I don't know how I could have coped with this without prayer. I had to daily hand it over to God. He's still carrying me each day as I grieve. He's faithful.

Now, the second big word is “preoccupy”. Preoccupy your mind the good things, just as healthy people eat healthy food. Paul instructs his church: keep feeding your minds with healthy, good things. There are a lot of things to think about in this world, some good and some not good. What is it that preoccupies your mind? What are you feeding it? We have before us what someone has referred to as a “charter for Christian thought”. Paul says “Fill your mind with things that inspire worship of God or obedience to Him and loving service to others. Let your mind feast on these things,” he says. “Whatever is true,” meaning reliable and honest and trustworthy. Feed your mind truths. “Whatever is honorable,” that means worthy of respect. “Whatever is just,” feed your mind the things that are right, conformable to God's standards and worthy of His approval. Feed your mind pure things, things that have moral purity and are virtuous. He says, “Feed your mind with things that are pleasing those things that are lovely and beautiful and pleasant to behold.” He says, “Feed your mind with things that are commendable, praiseworthy.” They have high standards. He said, “If something is excellent, feed your mind with excellent things, that which is extremely good in God’s sight. Feed your mind things that are praiseworthy, things that inspire your praise to God.” He says, “Think about all these things. It's your choice to make as to what you will fill your head with and what you will focus your mind upon.”

We do have a tendency to fill our minds with just the opposite of those things. So much social media is just plain bad for your mind. It sickens the spirit within. There are some things we put in our mind that is nothing more than junk food. Not good for us at all.

Bishop N.T. Wright tells a little story, he says:

A friend of mine described the reaction when he went home as a young teenager and announced to his mother that he'd become a Christian. Alarmed, she thought he'd joined some sort of cult. “They've brainwashed you,” she said. He was ready with the right answer: “If you'd seen what was in my brain,” he replied, “you'd realize it needed washing.”

Of course, he hadn't been brainwashed. In fact, again and again, this was certainly the case with my friend. When people bring their lives, their outer lives and inner lives, into the light of Jesus Christ, things begin to come clear.

Friend: a good personal question for each one of us to ask ourselves is, "What am I mostly feeding my heart mind these days? Solid food or junk food? Am I being brainwashed by Jesus or by the world?" You might be thinking, "You know, all these things sound good. Where can I find these healthy things for my mind?" Well, what Paul, I think, is describing is the word of God; that you read it and study it, memorize it and apply it to your life on a daily basis. May reading be a daily habit in your life of scripture. And of course, these qualities remind me of Jesus. They describe Him "to a T", don't they? Turn your eyes to Him and get to know Him as you read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

We're told in scripture that there's great value in singing hymns and spiritual songs, that those are good for the mind and the soul. Every Tuesday night at 7:15, Julie and I get on a computer and sing along with the Getty family hymn sing. It lifts our spirits. We experience joy and renewal in our thinking during those hymn times. Then there's good books and writings which enhance your vision of God's greatness and the beauty of life with him. Luther's large catechism. I like to read Tim Keller's materials and C.S. Lewis' writings and Eugene Peterson and Dallas Willard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; all kinds of books and articles on lives well-lived and character building that can make such a difference. Of course, you can find many beautiful things to feed your mind with as you behold God's creation. Take a walk and start noticing the beauty of God's marvelous hand in this world.

The next word is "practice". Paul says, "What you've heard and seen in me and received from me, practice these things." Members in a healthy church not only observe good examples and receive good teaching from them, they put into practice what they have seen and learned. They put it to work and apply it to life. Scripture is not meant to just be learned; it's meant to be applied.

Now, of course, you and I cannot physically walk with Paul and observe him or listen to him, but we do have the book of Acts and his letters that we can read. In these writings, we find Paul's values and passions, his priority and vision of advancing the gospel, how he kept his eye on the main thing. We see how he lived out the Jesus life and what practices gave him strength and encouragement and spiritual growth in his own life. And as we read those lessons and put them to work in our own lives, becoming doers of the word, we will find ourselves blessed and we will be a blessing to others, to the glory of God.

Finally, the last word is “promise”. Paul concludes his coaching with this promise, based on his own personal experience. When all of this is happening, you're doing these things, your healthy church will enjoy this blessing: God's presence. The God of peace will be with you. I personally can't think of anyone I'd rather have be with me as I face life than Him, the God of peace, who loves me, who gave His son to rescue me, and who knows exactly what I need in my life. Amen? Amen.

So now, friend, may the God of peace be with you and your congregation, giving His power and His peace to you, as you carry out God's purposes for your life, as you live the Jesus life.

Amen.