

Harmony through Happiness (Eat Some Peaches)

The Peace of God Part 3
Philippians 4:4 3/25/2017

Summary: Verses 4-7 are still on the topic of unity. To have unity we must overcome joylessness, lack of reasonableness, and anxiety. Joy is a virtue and is extremely important for many areas of the Christian life. In this context it is important for unity (as joy goes down, conflicts increase). Joy must be the normal pattern of our life (there are times for weeping, but when that time passes, we must return to joy as the norm). We have to be told to rejoice because we naturally resist it, and because we tend to seek joy in earthly things instead of in (not just from) the Lord. Find happiness by enjoying God throughout the day.

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Philippians 4:1 Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! 2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. 3 Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 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. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Introduction

What are some of the most important virtues a person should have? A virtue is a morally excellent behavior or characteristic. A godly character trait. Kindness, honesty, integrity, love, courage, generosity, humility, self-control, patience. What about happiness? Would you call that a virtue – a moral issue?

And while you chew on that, let me ask you this: Are you happy? Do you feel happy right now? And in your life in general - are you a happy person? What makes you happy? And what kinds of things take your happiness away? We always have a mix of happiness and sadness¹, but what does it take for the sadness or anger in your heart to be greater than the happiness and joy? These are very important questions. Happiness is a really big deal in the Christian faith. Your happiness – how much happiness you have, and what the source of it is - is a big deal to God. It matters a lot – not just in your life personally, but also your relationships with the people in your life, and for the health of the church, and for the glory of God. Your happiness impacts all of that. And so Paul gives this command in v.4: **Rejoice in the Lord always**. In other words, be happy all the time. That's the command. Be happy in the Lord all the time. My prayer is that by the end of this message you'll be more excited than ever about the prospect of having greater happiness in your life, and that as soon as tomorrow you'll notice a difference in your level of joy.

Context: Three Preparations for Unity: Happiness, Humility, and Tranquility

You may not have really thought much about your happiness playing a role in the health of the church, but I believe that's the primary focus here. The whole book of Philippians is focused on church unity, and the first 3 verses in ch.4 tackle the problem of disunity head on. Paul calls out the two parties involved by name, telling them to have the same attitude, and then calling on the church to step in and help those women reconcile. Then in v.4 he commands us to be happy, and I don't think that's a change of subject. I think he is still focused on unity in the church all the way through v.9. I'm convinced that all of this material, from v.4-9 is for the purpose of making spiritual preparations to enable us to have unity and harmony in our relationships.² If the people are not prepared spiritually – if they are missing certain virtues, then there will be no unity. A church can have a major unity campaign, put up banners about unity, have policies in place for unity, and everything else, but there still won't be unity unless the hearts of the individual people are prepared. We have to be prepared in three areas: our relationship with God, our relationship with people, and our relationship with circumstances. God, people, and circumstances – vv.4,5, and 6. Regarding God, we need to be joyful (v.4). Regarding people, we need to be gentle/reasonable (v.5). And regarding circumstances, we need to be unflappable and at peace (v.6). So the three virtues we need to prepare us for unity are happiness, humility, and tranquility.

¹ God designed us to have complex emotions. We are capable of experiencing conflicting emotions simultaneously. Paul rejoiced in the Lord always, and in Ro.9 he said he had unceasing anguish. His joy and happiness, and his anguish and sorrow lived side by side in his heart. In 2 Cor.6:10 he described himself as **sorrowful, yet always rejoicing**.

We're all like that. When do you ever have an emotion that is 100% unmixed with any conflicting emotion? Life just isn't that simple. Your child gets in an accident, and when you first hear that he's ok, you might feel gladness about that, and at the same time feel some unhappiness about the loss of your nice, new car. Our emotions are always a mix.

But sometimes one is a lot stronger than the other. You answer the phone and they say, "Congratulations, you got the job!" And you are elated. But when you hang up the phone you realize you forgot your food in the oven and now it's overcooked. So you're a little bit unhappy about ruining dinner, but mostly you're elated about getting your dream job.

When we have conflicting emotions, some are bigger than others, and you can tell which are the biggest by which ones have the strongest impact on your mood. If your mood goes downward, that means your sadness about burning dinner is greater than your happiness over the job. If you're still in a good mood, it's the other way around.

So rejoicing in the Lord is when your happiness in God is greater than your sorrow.

² The call to reasonableness in v.5 is an indication that Paul is still addressing the issue of interpersonal conflict. Also, the thrust of the whole book is to address the problem of disunity by calling the Philippians to greater joy – especially during suffering (for the direct connection between joy and unity see especially 1:25-27, 2:1-2, and 2:14-18. Paul also speaks of his own joy in connection with his unity with them in 1:4-5).

Need All Three

If you are weak in those virtues, you are going to get into conflicts with people. If you are missing happiness, humility, or tranquility – you are stressed out, bummed out, or puffed up – you are going to find yourself in all kinds of conflicts with people. And if the other person is also stressed out, bummed out, or puffed up, there will really be a lot of conflict.

Even if it's just one of the three. If they are stressed out and you're bummed out, or they are puffed up and you're stressed out, or any other combination, before long you're going to have problems. And so Paul is going to teach us how to be happy instead of being bummed out, how to be reasonable with each other, which requires humility, and how to have the peace of God in your heart instead of anxiety. Tonight we'll just focus on v.4 - happiness.

Happiness is a Virtue

I began with the question of whether happiness is a virtue. Here's the answer: YES! It's a virtue. It's a moral issue. It's a matter of godly character. The most well-known list of virtues in the Bible is in Gal.5:22 – the fruit of the Spirit. And right there in the list – right alongside things like love, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is joy! It's #2 in the list. God requires us to be happy. God is happy. Jesus Christ is happy. It's part of his character, and so as we strive to conform our character to be like his, we must strive to be happy. Happiness is a key part of holiness. You can be happy without being holy, but you can't be holy without being happy. It's a virtue, which means if you're lacking happiness, that's like lacking love or humility or patience or self-control.

The very fact that God commands it makes it a moral issue. And he commands it repeatedly. He commanded it in ch.3 and now twice again in ch.4.

Romans 12:12 Be joyful in hope.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Be joyful always.

It's hard to overstate the importance of joy. It's so fundamental.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit

The kingdom of God is a matter of joy.

Importance of Joy for Spiritual Progress

You need it, not only for church unity, but for all kinds of other aspects of the Christian life. That's why when Paul summarized his whole ministry in 2 Cor.1:24, he said **We are workers for your joy**. That's what a spiritual leader does – works for the joy of those in his charge. That's what the work of the ministry is. We saw this in ch.1. Paul was in so much pain that he longed to just die and go be with Jesus in heaven which would be better by far, but he ends up deciding he would rather stay here in this life, even with all the suffering. Why? Because if he died and went to heaven he would lose the opportunity to work for the Philippians' joy.

Philippians 1:23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

Seek your joy and meaning in life from making other people happy in the Lord. If you succeed, it will make you so happy and fulfilled that you will be willing to postpone heaven to keep doing it.

Proverbs 12:20 There is ... joy for those who promote peace.

This command in v.4 is word for word identical to v.1 of ch.3. So when he said it again here in ch.4, the original readers might have said, “Paul, you already said that. You’ve been talking about joy in the Lord throughout the whole book, and in 3:1 you said, **Finally brothers, rejoice in the Lord.**” To which Paul responds, “Oh, I already said that? Well, let me say it two more times.”

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Joy and Godliness

Why does God make such a big deal about joy in the Lord? It’s not just so we’ll feel good. It’s because if a person is not happy in the Lord, it will result in all kinds of sin in that person’s life, and it will keep him from making progress in faith or love or humility or patience or self-control or any of the other virtues in Scripture. If I’m not happy in the Lord, then I will be compelled to find my happiness elsewhere, and that is the root of 1000 different sins. I’ll feel like I have to scratch and claw for whatever it is I think will make me happy, and I’ll end up putting that ahead of loving others – so it will make me selfish. If I’m not happy enough in the Lord, I will not have self-control because my impulses will dominate me by promising me happiness in temporal pleasures. Not only that, but you love the things that bring you happiness, so if I’m not happy in the Lord, and I get my happiness from something else, then I’ll love that thing more than I love God. And failure to love God will ruin everything in your spiritual life.

Unity through Joy

Our happiness is important for many reasons, but the one that is highlighted in Philippians is the relationship between happiness and church unity. God calls us to be happy because when we lack happiness, that is when we start getting irritable with one another. Suffering tends to bring out the worst in us. A church faces trouble and hardship, the people lose their joy, and then they start getting on each other’s nerves. It happens in families too. Husband and wife are doing just fine, but then they get into a financial pinch, and the next thing you know, they are fighting. Or there is stress over a child who is causing problems, and under the stress of that, husband and wife start fighting. In a church, there’s financial stress, or persecution, or some kind of suffering, and people get grumpy with each other. It happened to the churches James wrote to, and it was happening in Philippi.

Why does that happen? Because when we feel pain, it threatens our happiness and so our natural instinct is to run harder after what we think will protect our happiness. And if that thing is anything other than God, then it won’t work, and that will make us irritable. And we will really get irritable whenever someone gets in the way of me having the circumstances I think I need to be happy. And so Paul writes them a letter to address their disunity problem, and his strategy is to teach them how to maintain their joy even during suffering.

He does that by example – shows them how he remains joyful and happy even when he suffers. He shows them other examples, like Timothy and Epaphroditus. And then he teaches them principles about how to increase their joy in the Lord. Because if I’m happy in the Lord, I don’t need anything else. And when I don’t need anything else, that frees me up to love and to give and to sacrifice. And when suffering comes, it won’t put me on edge or make me irritable, because it can’t touch my joy source. Unity comes when we put each other first. And putting others first is a million times easier when all your happiness needs are met in the Lord. We naturally tend to think that happiness comes through relational harmony.

“My marriage would be so much happier if we had harmony and weren’t fighting all the time. My family would have so much more joy if there were peace in the home instead of strife. If we had harmony, then we would have happiness.” That seems to make sense, but really it’s backwards. What we need to learn from this section is that it’s not happiness through harmony; it’s harmony through happiness. You don’t get a happier marriage by getting along better. You get along better by finding greater happiness.

You don't get peace in your home or church, and then that brings your joy back. You get your joy back, and that causes peace in the home and the church.

So when Paul tells these two women to adopt a harmonious attitude, and he tells the church to help them reconcile, and then he starts talking about rejoicing in the Lord and defeating anxiety – that's not a change of subject. He's showing us how it's done. Harmony through happiness. Relational peace through inner peace. Unity through joy.

Always

There is a Time to Weep

“Ok, joy is really important. I get it – that's easy enough to swallow. What is hard to swallow is that little word, **always**.” How do we harmonize that with this:

Ecclesiastes 3:1 There is a time for everything 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance?

How does that fit with Paul saying we should **always** be rejoicing? Is Paul saying we are never allowed to be sad? In Ro.9:2 Paul said he had unceasing anguish. The psalmists, who teach us the right way to deal with hardship, were very often crushed and broken. In Jn.11:35 and Lk.19:41 Jesus was so sad he was crying. Even the Holy Spirit is grieved sometimes (Eph.4:30). There are plenty of situations that call for grieving. It is appropriate to be sad about loss, broken relationships, suffering, and certainly over our own sin.

Isaiah 22:12 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.

James 4:9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

So how do we reconcile that with this command to **rejoice in the Lord *always***?

Joy You Can't Feel?

Many of you have been taught that the solution to that tension is to think of joy as different from happiness. Very often pastors will say, “Happiness is a feeling, but joy – that's different. It's not a feeling. Biblical joy is a spiritual and ontological reality that isn't an emotion, but rather a determined act of the will and a disposition of the inner man that is cognitive and volitional and transcends the affections. I hear that and I think, “Ok, you've been in seminary too long.”

You know what I think that is? I think it's just an effort to use big words and complicated philosophies to worm their way out of obeying commands that address our emotions. The command to feel happy all the time is too hard, so they try to redefine happiness. That's very common. Many times I've heard pastors just come right out and say, “God can't command us to have a certain emotion.” And they redefine everything so emotions aren't involved. “Joy is not a feeling – it is a disposition of the heart.” “Hope isn't a feeling – it's a decision.” “When God commands us to have compassion, that does not mean you have to actually feel compassion.” They do it with love too. “Love isn't a feeling – it's just sacrificial service.” So when Jesus commanded me to love God with all my mind and all my strength and all my heart and all my soul, that doesn't include my emotions? I don't really have to love him with every part of my being, just the parts I can easily control? None of that has any biblical basis. The word for love means love. If God wanted to say “obedience” or “self-sacrificial service,” he could have said that. There are Greek words that mean that, if that's what God wanted to communicate. But he used the word love, and in every culture, in every era, in every language, love is an emotion. So is compassion, so is hope, and so is joy. If anything is a feeling, joy is. What good is joy you can't feel? When the Bible promises that we will have joy in heaven forever, it uses the same word as Paul used here when he commanded us to

have it now. So are we going to say that in heaven we will have some kind of abstract version of joy that you can't feel? What good is that? You know what joy that you can't feel is? Nothing!

There is no difference between happiness and joy. They are the same thing, and they are most definitely feelings.

Pattern of Life

So what's the solution? How can you have sorrow and still be happy in the Lord **always**? This word translated *always* – if you look up the other times it's used in the Bible, it usually doesn't mean every second of every day. Paul said he was *always* thanking God for the Philippians (1:4).³ In John 18:20 Jesus said he always taught in the synagogues. But we know that at least one teaching was on a mountain. So the word doesn't mean every second of every day. It refers to something is a general rule. Something that is done consistently, routinely, as a regular, ongoing, characteristic pattern of life. It means kind of the same thing your wife means when she says, "You always leave your dirty dishes out on the counter." Maybe not every single time, but enough to where it is a predictable pattern of life.

So what Paul is saying here is that we are to be happy in the Lord as a regular, consistent pattern of life. It's the normal, everyday characteristic of your life. So are there times of sadness? Of course. But those times are an interruption of the norm. And when the time for weeping is over, you return to your normal pattern of life, which is joy. That's what Paul is commanding here.

There's a time for weeping – no question about that. Those who are parents know that when a little kid is crying, there is an appropriate amount of time for that to go on. The kid gets hurt, and he cries. And mom and dad are sympathetic, and try to comfort him, and it's perfectly fine that he is crying. But at some point you get to where you tell the child, "Ok, that's enough crying." If his little puppy dies, it's fine for him to cry for a time. But he shouldn't cry for the rest of his life.

When it's time to weep, then weep. Drink from the bitter cup. If you just got news that your child was killed by a drunk driver, it's time to weep. You don't even want to feel happiness at that moment. You don't turn on a sitcom or a comedian, you don't want anyone to make you laugh. The only thing that's fitting is sadness. So in a time like that, grieve - drink from the bitter cup. But then when that time passes, set that cup aside and drink again from the cup of joy. Stay in the dark forest of sorrow while it's fitting, but then come back out of the woods onto the normal, regular path of happiness in the Lord that typically characterizes your life.

Rejoicing in Suffering

"So if it's ok to weep when it's time to weep, what does the Bible mean when it says we are to rejoice even in our suffering?" I think what it means is when we have gone through the appropriate grief, we don't have to wait for circumstances to change in order to return to joy. Just because the circumstances are still painful does not mean you need to continue to weep, because your joy is in the Lord, not circumstances.

Why Do We Need This Command?

Ok, so we have talked about what it means to rejoice – it's talking about real, emotional happiness that you can feel. We have talked about the word **always** – it means the normal, regular pattern of life. What else can we learn from this verse?

One of the most important and most difficult skills to learn in Bible study is observation. We did that on the FB discussion today, and the very first observation was that this is a command. God isn't giving us permission to be happy; he's commanding it.

³ That can't mean every second of every day, because he also said the same thing to the Corinthians, the Romans, the Colossians, the Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Think through the significance of that. The conclusion that Sarah drew from that observation was that if it is commanded, it must be possible. I think that's right on. What else can we conclude from the fact that it is a command?

How about this: evidently, we need to be told to be happy. Raise your hand if you prefer feeling happy over feeling sad and miserable. Ok, so if that is the case, why do we have to be told to be happy? If we all want that anyway, why does there have to be verses in the Bible commanding us to rejoice? Evidently, left to ourselves, we would not choose joy, even though we want it.

1) We Cling to Our Sorrow

Think about the emotion that tends to dominate in your heart when things go wrong (sadness, anger, despair, depression etc.). We tend to cling to those emotions - the very emotions we wish we could be rid of. Something in us wants to stay and wallow in them. A dozen times a day we experience a mix of hardships and blessings, and we have the choice : do I let the hardship dominate how I feel, or do I put that in the background and put most of my attention on enjoyment of the blessings? And time after time after time, we opt for the former. We are faced with a choice: Should I ride on the wings of God's gestures of love for me and be happy, or should I let some painful circumstances kick me in the face? I think I'll let circumstances kick me in the face. I'll just turn a blind eye to God's kindness, ignore the blessings for now, and instead of enjoying them I think I'll just roll around in the cactus. Should I focus on God's kindness and remain joyful? No, I think I'll focus on the pain and hardship and grumble and complain, or drop into a sour mood

Why do we do that? What kind of insanity would make us choose misery over joy?

Self-Pity

In some cases, it's because of a desire for pity. We want people around us to appreciate how rough we've got it. And no one's going to do that as long as we stay happy and enjoy God's blessings. If I go through something really hard or suffer some major loss, and focus on God's goodness and maintain joy, no one is going to feel sorry for me. They're just going to think, "Oh, that thing he went through must not have been that bad. It must not have hurt much - he's still happy." And the truth is it really hurt a lot, *and people need to know that*. Even if we won't admit it to ourselves, we want sympathy, and we are actually willing to ruin our whole day (or week or year or life) descending into self-pity in order to get it, when the option of pursuing joy is right there the whole time.

Resolve to Rejoice

Joy is a feeling, not just a decision of the will; but it does begin with a decision of the will. Moods come from attitudes, and attitudes are a function of your will. You decide what your attitude will be, and that shapes how you feel, which drives your mood. Your emotions don't have to be the victim of your circumstances. God shows the prophet what is going to happen to Israel before God finally brings deliverance, and it isn't pretty.

Habakkuk 3:16 I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled.

That's the initial wave of emotion that comes over Habakkuk when he hears what is going to happen. The Assyrians are going to come and do horrible things to Israel, and it rattles Habakkuk to the core. But then he makes a decision:

Habakkuk 3:16 Yet I will wait patiently

Eventually this judgment will come to an end and God will send another nation to defeat the Assyrians. And Habakkuk makes a conscious decision to wait patiently for that. “What does waiting patiently look like?”

17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

This is a resolve of the will. Even when circumstances are as horrible and painful and hopeless as can be – there’s no food, no money, no resources – everything’s gone **18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.** My emotions are not going to be the helpless victim of circumstances. You wouldn’t think it would be difficult to let go of painful emotions and enjoy delightful ones, but it is. Something in us wants to cling to the pain, or the sadness, or the anger, or whatever. Psalms 42-43 are a vivid description of a man struggling to let go of his sorrow and return to hope in the Lord. He’s in the process of trying to make that shift, and his soul is resisting it, and he’s fighting against his own soul. If you are having trouble letting go of the negative emotions and embracing hope in God, spend a lot of time in Ps.42-43.

2) Seeking Joy in the Wrong Place

So that’s one reason why we have to be commanded to rejoice – because our souls resist it. There’s a second reason I see in this verse. And this is the most important observation you can make about v.4. The command is to **rejoice in the Lord**. The second thing that keeps us from having real joy is our tendency to seek it from the wrong sources.

Philippians 3:1 Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!

Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always.

Habakkuk 3:18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The command is not, “Enjoy,” or “Enjoy life.” It’s “Enjoy God.”

For unbelievers, their emotions are enslaved to circumstances because their joy comes from circumstances. So when circumstances go bad, the joy is gone, no matter how much they try to decide to be happy. But if your joy comes from the way God is, and your experiences of God and enjoyment of God, that can continue as long as God is the way he is, which is forever, because God does not change.

Jesus pronounced a curse on people who have temporary joy (Lk.6:25). Why? Because if your joy is temporary, that means your joy source is temporary, which means it’s something other than God. Whenever you lose your joy, ask, “Where was I seeking my joy from?”

Now, you might be thinking, “I’ve tried to find joy in the Lord, but it doesn’t seem to work. I read my Bible and pray, and I don’t really feel all that happy. I watch a game with some friends, and I do feel happy. Games work, movies work; Bible doesn’t – that’s my experience. I go to prayer group, sit through church, and it doesn’t make me happy. I go to a nice restaurant, or go snowboarding, or get a big paycheck, and it does make me happy. How do I learn to find happiness in the Lord?”

Seek Joy IN (not just from) the Lord

The starting place is to notice that little word **in**. Find your happiness *in* the Lord – not just from the Lord. There are a lot of Christians who think they are finding their joy in the Lord, when, in reality, they are actually seeking their joy in some earthly thing, and they are just using the Lord to help them get that thing. For a while my family got into watching a reality show about gold mining. It’s interesting, to me, to see how the mining is done. The show tracks the progress of three different gold mining operations, and one of them is the 3:16 Mining Company, named after John 3:16, and the owner is outspoken about being a Christian. Unfortunately, he and his father frequently pray on the program. And I say “unfortunately,”

because all they every pray is for God to give them gold. Sometimes they will thank him when they do find gold. When they don't find gold, he becomes extremely angry or depressed. It's clear that the source he seeks his happiness from is gold. That's the great treasure in his heart. And God's role is to provide him with that treasure – that joy source that he thinks will make him happy. If you get your joy from some other treasure, and you seek that treasure *from* God, that's not the same thing as finding your joy *in* God.

Eat Peaches

Finding your joy in God means you enjoy God himself. We don't have time to go into detail on how to do that right now, but I did preach a full sermon on it a couple weeks ago (Text: Isa.55. Title: Come to the Waters.) How many times in an average day do you think there is an opportunity to enjoy God?

To just take a moment and enjoy experiencing one of his attributes.

To enjoy experiencing his great wisdom.

To enjoy his protection.

To enjoy being listened to by him.

To enjoy being provided for by him.

To enjoy being enlightened by him.

To enjoy being sheltered by him, used by him, strengthened or empowered by him, healed by him.

To enjoy being searched and thoroughly known by him.

To enjoy his gestures of love every time he makes some food really hit the spot, or enables you to really enjoy some beauty in the creation, or have a great time with family or friends, or the ability to enjoy some other blessing.

Imagine a tree, and each of those is a sweet piece of fruit that you can take and enjoy. Think of a peach tree with big, ripe, juicy, delicious peaches. But right next to that tree is another tree. Just like in the Garden of Eden, where there was the tree of life, and then there was a forbidden tree. So imagine you have two trees in your life – the life-giving tree with the delicious peaches of enjoying God, and another tree with bitter, rotten, poisonous fruit. That fruit is all the bitter things that happen in your life. Some people insist on a constant diet of that bitter fruit. You get up in the morning and you didn't sleep very well, and you focus all your attention on that. It's like taking a piece of bitter fruit and chewing on it and swallowing it. Then something goes wrong with your breakfast, you forget something you need at work, your spouse is short with you or insensitive, and each time you decide to put all those pieces of bitter fruit in your mouth by dwelling on those things. Someone makes a cutting remark, or you're reminded of something someone did to hurt you – some sin they committed against you, and you decide to put that bitter fruit in your mouth and suck on it until you get every drop of bitterness out of it. Someone cuts you off in traffic, and you devour that piece of bitter fruit – the skin, the core, the seeds, the stem – you're gnawing on that fruit for the rest of the day, like a dog on a bone. Bitter fruit all day long, ignoring the sweet, life-giving peaches that are hanging right there in front of you. Then after a few days of that you complain about having a spiritual stomachache. "Man, I really don't feel very good. I don't have any joy." And you get your Bible out, spend 5 minutes trying to nibble on a peach, but even then – even while you're praying, in between bites of the peach you're wolfing down whole pieces of the bitter fruit. And you can't figure out why the joy isn't coming.

Sometimes when people lack joy, the solution is really complicated. But many times it's not complicated at all. It's very simple. You say, "God, I don't feel good" and God is saying, "Eat a peach. Stop gorging yourself on poison, and enjoy fellowship with me, and I promise – you'll be happy."

When you're having a bad day, the problem isn't in the day as much as in the way you're having it. The day isn't the problem – it's the day the Lord has made and should be rejoiced in. Instead of saying, "I'm having a bad day," we should probably say, "I'm having a good day badly. I'm doing a terrible job having this good day because a few hardships are keeping me from rejoicing in the hundreds of blessings." In Isa.27 God describes his people as a vineyard, and he says this:

Isaiah 27:3 I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continually.

Literally it's **I water it *by the moment***. God cares for us in increments of moments. It's not that he gives us a blessing once every few hours. He's giving us wonderful things to enjoy moment by moment. By 10:00am there might have been 50 or 100 already. If I burn my tongue and drop my phone and crack the screen and get a flat tire, all before noon, and I say, "I'm having the worst day – I can't wait until it's over" How can that happen when God is blessing me *by the moment*? How can 100 blessings go by and I'm still managing to have the worst day every because of 3 hardships? It's not because of the hardships; it's because of which tree I'm eating from.

And please understand – I'm not just talking here about looking on the bright side. There's a huge difference between someone just trying to be optimistic and looking on the bright side of hard circumstances, and someone enjoying God. Enjoyment of God is an interaction with a person. Some circumstances really are horrible, and they really don't have a bright side. Looking on the bright side might help when you are late for work or you stub your toe, but when you get cancer or lose a loved one, you need someone much greater than that to maintain joy.

Some people are not eating a lot of bitter fruit, but they are not eating the good fruit either. If you are like me, you can sometimes fall into robot mode, where you are just grinding out your daily routine – doing all the stuff you do every day, and you are not depressed because you don't dwell on the painful things, but you're not happy either because you're not enjoying God very much – you're just plowing through life like a machine.

There are numerous ways to miss the peaches. You can seek your happiness from something besides God, you can gorge yourself on bitter fruit, or you can just ignore the good fruit and proceed through life knowing information about God but hardly ever actually enjoying him. But the command in Philippians 4:4 is clear: **Be happy in the Lord always**. That will bring glory and honor to him, it will bring joy and happiness to you, and it will bring harmony and unity to the church.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) When you lack joy, is it usually because of eating bitter fruit, or taking the "robot" approach, or seeking happiness through something besides God? (All of us fall into all three errors, but is there one that seems most troublesome to you?)
- 2) Of all the various ways to enjoy God, is there one that comes easiest to you?
- 3) Describe the time in your life when you had the greatest joy in the Lord.

Study Questions for Next Week

- 1) The term translated "gentleness" or "graciousness" in v.5 refers to reasonableness. How does this verse fit into the context of ch.4 and the overall message of the book?
- 2) What insights can you find elsewhere in Scripture that teach us principles about what reasonableness and unreasonableness look like in practice?
- 3) Why does Paul tell us to make our reasonableness evident, rather than just telling us to be reasonable?