

**Reflections on Philippians 4:1–9**  
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As warm and affirming as Paul's letter has been so far, he now seeks to address some disquiet within the church. Our focus shifts from the "opponents" and "dogs" outside the church to disturbances among the members of the *koinonia* itself. And are we surprised? Well, only if we expect Christians to be somehow exempt from human conditions, and only if we do not see potential for growth in the natural rub of communal life. Any attempt to sanitise ourselves and the *koinonia* of every upset, disagreement and even conflict is like trying to plant a garden without compost and fertiliser. But like our times of shared suffering, how we are in the mess of disagreement matters. So, Paul rounds off his letter with guidance for the inevitable impasse and hurts we face as we relate with each other.

Paul encourages two members of the church in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, to "be of the same mind." Presumably there is some dispute between them, though the details are lost to us. He reminds the women of when they once worked side-by-side with Paul, companions in love and service. Concerned about the tension that has erupted between them, Paul appeals to the *koinonia* to help Euodia and Syntyche find ways to work together. The Greek word used by Paul here means "yokefellow," so the image is one of oxen pulling in the same direction.

After acknowledging the tensions within the *koinonia*, Paul bursts forth with this encouragement: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." *What is with Paul?!* This seems like such a disconnect, a kind of flippant "don't worry, be happy" in the midst of what are most likely painful rifts between friends. The word for "rejoice" is comprised of two parts—a prefix meaning favourably disposed or leaning towards and a root that means grace. Putting them together, to rejoice has the sense not of a happy-clappy external expression but of *an inner leaning or disposition towards grace*. This leaning into grace is Paul's prevailing theme in his letter, so much so, he uses the word "joy/rejoice" sixteen times.

It occurs to me that what it means to rejoice in this way, that is, to lean into grace, is most certainly related to Paul's suggestion of a method—prayer—and his final exhortation to "think about these things." We'll return to prayer as the means of a grace-full disposition in a moment, but for now, let's think about thinking.

Paul urges us to attend well to our thoughts. "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things.*" This raises the question, on what do we dwell? How might our thinking be shaped by something other than grace at times? And what impact does this have on the prevailing spirit within the *koinonia*?

Put very simply, thoughts and emotions, when they arise, are neutral in and of themselves. Something happens and thoughts and emotions are part of our response. We may or may not even notice what is



essentially neurological activity and, left on their own, the thoughts pass like weather across a mountain. No problem.

But of course, we do not let every thought and emotion pass. Some trigger a reaction within us. We grab hold of them, or perhaps it can feel like they grab hold of us! It's like a needle drops on a record, causing what is often a life-long narrative to begin playing.

So, it is not so much our thoughts and emotions that are troublesome, *but the stories we tell about them*. What was initially weather passing by has now become a storm of narrative that justifies and shores up our perspective. Then we often share these stories with others, thus bolstering what is becoming an entrenched viewpoint.

Like a bushfire spark or a COVID-19 spore, disaffection can travel through relationships quickly and mercilessly. What is especially misleading is when stories are told with great certainty and conviction, as though our experience is everyone's experience or that it could possibly comprise an entire situation. Soon we've created enmity where none exists. We've divided what in truth is whole. We've separated what is in fact one in Christ into victors and victims, winners and losers, those who are in/right and those who are out/wrong.

To attend well to our thinking as Paul implores can elevate our minds from the mire of drama and spin to which our unredeemed thoughts are inclined. Especially when we find ourselves part of a conversation in which the yarn of discontent is being spun, it can be healing to focus on what is true, honourable, pure and so on. Rather than getting pulled down what is a divisive and destructive path, we might listen deeply and ask questions that enable one another to discern *what is really going on, especially within—often the real place of conflict.*



Through our careful listening and sensitive questioning, we can help each other lift the needle off the old record, thus silencing the stories that are so often the source of unhappiness and grief.

But as helpful as the intention to dwell on the good and godly might be, in my experience, something more is needed than positive thinking. My efforts to think differently cannot stem the tide alone nor does trying to redirect my thoughts get to the heart of the matter. To become people of peace, we must allow our awareness of the oneness that is the reality in our world to grow and strengthen.

Our separation from one another, creation and ultimately God is an illusion that is promoted by our thoughts and limited perceptions. So, by laying aside our thinking and perceiving and entering the realm of communion with God, we discover the wholeness and unity that is *really real*.

Martin Laird says it this way:

A helpful image to express this sort of thing is a wheel with spokes centred on a single hub. The hub of the wheel is God; we the spokes. Out on the rim of the wheel the spokes are furthest from one another, but at the centre, the hub, the spokes are most united to each other. They are a single meeting in the one hub. ...The more we journey towards the Centre the closer we are both to God and to each other. The problem of feeling isolated from both God and others is overcome in the experience of the Centre. This journey into God and the profound meeting of others in the inner ground of silence is a single movement. Exterior isolation is overcome in interior communion.

In my experience, I see how easy it is for the bundle of stories that stem from my thoughts to build up a callous around my heart, especially when I've been hurt or impacted by a particular situation. Layers of frustrated interaction, misunderstanding and unhelpful exchange create a hardness that does not allow for compassion, reconciliation and new ways of being together to penetrate very easily. But as Martin Laird says, "The grace of Christian wholeness that flowers in silence, dispels this illusion of separation." Friends, this is our hope.

May we be a people of prayer, especially prayer in which we simply abide with God who is in all and through all. May we seek to live from this unifying, communing place more and more, which does not lead to polite conformity but non-defensiveness, hospitality, generosity of spirit and a deep, grateful awareness of grace. And in a world of enmity, division and hardness, may we know ourselves to be Christ's reconciled and reconciling people.