

JOY IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCE

Philippians 4:2–23

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Our theme throughout the letter of Paul to the Philippians has been the life of continual rejoicing. Tonight's topic is "Joy in Any Circumstance." As we prepare to get into Philippians 4, I want to take a moment and isolate three key principles that really strike me from the whole of the Philippians letter that I think I could summarize very rapidly.

One of the key principles that comes out of Philippians is we can be new and renewed people in the same old place. Some people have the mistaken idea that, in order to be renewed and really serve God, they need to change locations. Do a different job or go to a different school. Or do something significant. But never once in the Philippian letter does Paul root joy in a change of location. Or suggest to them that the church members who are serving Christ in their lay vocations are somehow not doing God's highest will, because they're not involved in a pulpit or a professional ministry somewhere. He encourages them to remain faithful to God where they are.

One of the great ennobling things about the gospel is that Paul writes such incredibly profound things, in very simple language, to people who do not have any sort of theological education at all. But there is this aspect of the gospel that commends itself to all of us who are average people. It says to us that the gospel comes to us rich in content and it ennoble the ordinariness of our life.

A second key principle out of Philippians—I mentioned this morning that there was a phrase that Susanna Wesley used of her life, "Order is heaven's first law." I hope that one of the things that may be said of me when I am gone—if you're around after I leave—I hope that a favorite phrase

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of mine will be remembered. It comes straight out of the content of the Philippian letter. It's not a quote from Philippians, but I think it summarizes what Paul is saying in this letter. That is simply this: "What happens in us is more important than what happens to us." Life can be ill-spent looking for favorable circumstances. There are a lot of things circumstantially, outside of ourselves, that are never going to change. The only way that we can cope with what we're facing is to let ourselves be changed. So what happens in us is more important than what happens to us. We want to change our environment, but God wants to change us in the environment.

Then, of course, it almost goes without saying, and yet it should be said, that there's a key principle from the Philippian letter, from all the New Testament: Christ must be at the center of our experience. So the very center of this letter—Philippians 2, which speaks of Christ's sense of a limit—is an appeal to us to let our whole life be an imitation of Christ. An emptying out of self, and a willingness to give completely of ourselves to God and to other people.

That then takes us into tonight's text: Philippians 4:2–23... "Joy in Any Circumstance." There are three things that we want to talk about from this fourth chapter.

The first is the concern in Paul's mind, verses 2–9. Then the contentment in Paul's heart, verses 10–19. Then the conclusion of Paul's letter.

I. First, the concern in Paul's mind.

The concern relates to a problem that is raised. "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. 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" (Philippians 4:2–3, NIV). Here is what Paul has been delicately heading toward in the whole letter. I think one of the reasons that occasioned the Philippian letter was a sharp division in the church that was headquartered in

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these two ladies who were evidently in places of high services within the church. I would suspect, knowing churches as I do, that when there is disagreement between two leading people, often that disagreement perpetuates itself in the body so that some people were loyal to Euodia and some to Syntyche. How a pastor such as Paul deals with a church problem like this gives us great insight on how we, in our own lives, can deal with personal problems.

These ladies have lovely names. In the Greek, “Euodia” actually means “good trip” or “prosperous journey.” When she was born, her parents looked at her and said, “This kid is going to have a good trip through life.” It’s sort of a happy name. Maybe before she had her conflict with Syntyche, she was a happy person. Then there’s “Syntyche,” whom some have said the name means “soon touchy.” But I don’t think that’s what her name means. In fact, I know from the Greek that her name actually means “good fortune” or “happy chance.” So Good Trip and Happy Chance are disagreeing with one another in the Philippian church and Paul has to deal with it.

What happens, as is so often the case of people with conflict in the body of Christ, is that two people are locked in a concern that is central to them but not central to Christ. It’s so easy to take the concern that is central to us and to project that and make it seem that it’s central to Christ. But Paul, early on in the letter, has spoken of what is central to Christ when he really, sort of between the lines, addresses the problem between Euodia and Syntyche as a lack of giving in to one another. He’s saying to them, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

Paul here gives us an understanding of how not to correct interpersonal problems. I might look at some of the things that Paul did not do. And by the way, we are never told what the conflict was about. That’s probably good, because there are a lot of things that we don’t need to know. If

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we'll just pray for people when we know they have a problem—we don't need to know all the gory details—and Paul doesn't lay them all out before us.

But some of the things he doesn't do: He does not insult anybody. He does not say, for example, “You two are troublemakers, and if you don't straighten out, I'm going to toss you out of the church.” It's amazing to me how many times people in leadership positions in the body of Christ suddenly act like a tin dictator or a totalitarian kind of a person who feels that somehow, because they're invested with a title or office, they have the right to throw their weight around. And to dump on people. But Paul does not demean these ladies, whatever their problem is, by insulting them. He does not spill a load on them by doing this: “I'm suffering in prison and no problems that you have could possibly be as great as my problems. If you were really spiritual, what you would be doing is you'd be praying and fasting for me. But you, back in the Philippian church, aren't spiritual—especially Euodia and Syntyche, who are so wrapped up in their own little problem, they don't have time to pray for poor Paul in prison facing certain death. Shame on you!”

How many times in the body of Christ people are asked to change based on a sense of being made to feel shameful and guilty. There is no injection of self-pity by Paul, telling them about his own problems in order to get them feeling sorry for him, to change their own mind.

What Paul does is urge them to agree in the Lord. I really think that this phrase, “agree in the Lord,” does not mean that he calls upon them to simply give in to one another on this particular issue and come out with a position statement that is a compromise between them. It is not “Euodia, I want you to take Syntyche's side,” or vice-versa. But it is to agree in the Lord.

I've known people to agree in the Lord who have not walked away having the same opinion, but they've walked away agreeing to disagree; agreeing to love one another and agreeing to not let

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that controversy dominate their life, but to shelf it. I think that to agree in the Lord means to have the Spirit of Christ to recognize what are truly primary issues over which we must disagree for the sake of the gospel. There are issues in the body of Christ where occasionally we have to take a stand, because it's such a primary issue. We cannot afford to let someone hold a different opinion about the person of Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. But on other matters, we can agree to disagree.

We try to model that as a church family. The body of Christ ought to be a big enough place for that. Too often, the body of Christ has drawn a small circle within the larger body and said, "We know that you've got to belong to Christ, but you've also got to fit within this smaller circle in order to belong, because you're not really, really a Christian unless you fit within our circle." I believe that the church is under obligation to not draw the circle of membership any larger or any smaller than Jesus himself has drawn it. Somehow, one of the great things that I would like to experience in the body of Christ on the local level, as well as on an international level, is to see diversity in God's people, bonded with a sense of unity. We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord.

So Paul appeals to them to be of one mind together. In order to have unity, he reminds them of their place with them as a "co-laborer," as a "yoke fellow," a wonderful term for people who are plowing a team of oxen together. You can't be going separate ways. He reminds them that Euodia and Syntyche, in the past, had shouldered that responsibility of leadership and service with him. They'd been true yoke fellows. So he reminds them of that high calling and urges them now to quit going in these directions that are apart from one another.

Then he also reminds them of their place in Christ. Their names, he says, are in the Book of Life. And he appeals to others to help them, rather than to shun them. It's so frequently the case that

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when people get into physical trouble or relational trouble of one kind or another, that people stay away from them and let them “work through” their problems. Paul encourages the church to rally to their cause. And to help them.

So that’s the problem that Paul raises in verses 2–3, it’s part of the concern on his mind.

Then along with the problem, the presence of the Lord is realized. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4–7, NIV).

He leads them to recognize the presence of the Lord, first through their responsibilities, which in this particular text are threefold. He lays upon us and upon the church, then, three obligations.

A. First, to rejoice in the Lord. “Rejoice in the Lord always.” And lest we fail to get the message, “Again, I say to you, rejoice.” This is the opposite of a critical or an argumentative or even a dejected spirit. And given the particular problem between these two ladies, I’m sure that there was argumentation and disputation within the church.

I’ve found that when I get overly critical in my life and overly argumentative and snappy, joy is gone. Almost to the level that I am a critical person, to that level, I am a nonjoyful person. I like a term being “loyally critical.” That to me suggests that, when you see something that is wrong, you have a real concern about it. After praying about it and finding out from the Lord if you should tackle the problem, then you go to the person who is responsible for the problem as you see it, in a spirit of loyalty, and share with them out of your life.

Paul here is not encouraging us to stay in a total lack of judgment in our life. But I’ve found that there are a lot of things and circumstances that I’ve judged that I’ve become so involved in—

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writing a letter to someone, I don't know, or caught up in some crazy issue or some personality defect that I see in someone else—isn't it easier to see the defect in someone else than it is to see it in myself? To the degree that there's that kind of a criticalness within me, to that degree, the joy ebbs out of my life. So he encourages the Christians, "Rejoice in the Lord."

I like what Acts 2 says about the early Christians, how after they were converted and filled with the Spirit, they began sharing together. It says of the Jerusalem saints that they ate with glad and generous hearts. I don't believe that they began being glad about their food as a result of the idea that before they were Christians they ate hamburgers and after they were Christians they were eating steaks. I don't think their diet changed at all. It was just that, because of Christ in their life and the presence of the Spirit in their life, their attitude toward even their meals changed. Instead of looking at a plate of food and saying, "That again?" They said, "Isn't it so good to sit down and have this time together and eat whatever this is." Rejoice in the Lord—our responsibility.

B. Then he encourages the second responsibility and that is to practice gentleness in life. "Let your gentleness be evident to all" (Philippians 4:5). Gentleness has been described as "a sweet reasonableness." It's to look kindly and reasonably at the facts of a circumstance or a situation. To not be harsh. To not be overbearing. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 10:1, "By meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you." Gentleness is a real aspect of Christ's nature. And James 3:17 says that the wisdom that's from above is gentle. So gentleness is a quality of life that is meant to be practiced by both men and women.

C. Then the third thing that Paul lays upon us as a responsibility is to control our anxiety.

That's very difficult to do, isn't it? "Do not be anxious about anything" (Philippians 4:6). But he just doesn't leave us with that. He tells us how not to be anxious. If in everything, by prayer and petition, we will give thanksgiving and present our requests to the Lord. There are those within

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this body whose ministry it is to counsel others, by profession. There are many others of us who listen to people with problems and try to offer counsel and advice.

One of the things that I'm discovering—I think, in great clarity—is that it will help you when you are going through a problem, especially one that is producing a great deal of anxiety in you, if before you even seek the services of a counselor which can really help you (and I believe in counseling, and we have a counseling ministry in the church), rather than first looking to human assistance, first spend time on your knees, looking for help from the Lord and what He will put in your life. Take a moment to thank Him for the predicament that you're in, whatever it is.

And I'm not suggesting that we simply thank God for everything that happens in life, in the sense that everything, no matter how evil it is, is a good gift. There are some things that happen that are very bad and very destructive. What we're to give thanks for in that circumstance is that God is working the good through this terrible thing that's been placed in our life.

Paul says, “When we're faced with life's adversities, relationships that are difficult, we should spend time on our knees and thank the Lord.” “I thank You, Lord, for putting that difficult person in my life, because it's producing something good in me. Help me to see what the good is. And help my spirit to be patient.”

So the Lord, through Paul, lays these responsibilities on us. To take an active role in rejoicing and not simply wait for the good times, the feel-goods, but to activate our will in all of life and always rejoice. Here's Paul, writing out of a prison experience and saying, “Even in this, I am learning to rejoice. So I say to you, rejoice!” You can be happy in the prison experience.

Then practice gentleness. Don't develop the texture of life that is harsh. Paul's circumstances are very harsh. Very extreme and very difficult. But he's not going to let his outer environment describe his inner environment. He's not going to be raspy and rash with people.

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Some years ago, I heard a message from the Book of Jude, where it is mentioned that Michael contended with the devil over the body of Moses. A very strange passage that I don't understand—and I don't know anybody that understands what all that means. But one of the things that Jude says is that Michael did not bring a railing accusation against Satan. But said to him, instead, “The Lord rebuke you” (Jude 9). The point of Jude is that, in wrestling with the devil, Michael didn't become like the devil. If the devil is an accuser and someone who is always dumping on other people and calling them names and pointing out their bad points—which, that's his vocation, as I understand it—Michael did not adopt the personality of Satan by saying back to him curses and blames and telling Satan what a loser he was. But he left it to the Lord in whom judgment really does rest. Michael, the great archangel, did not let the harshness of Satan's personality, that he had conflict with, rub into his own life and seep into his own soul, so that he became in his own life a satanically-oriented kind of a person. That's part of the sweet reasonableness and gentleness that Paul is talking about. And finally, controlling anxiety through prayer and thanksgiving.

Then Paul lets us know that, in the midst of our responsibilities, as we realize the presence of the Lord, there are provisions that God makes, and one of them certainly is the presence of God himself. “Present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). God is always present in our need and in our struggles. He also suggests to us that God's peace will guard our life as a provision. “The peace of God, which passes all understanding” (verse 7).

I've seen that peace of God work so many times in people's lives. They were so overwhelmed with such incredible tragedy, that there was no reason on earth why there should be any peace or tranquility amidst the suffering. Yet the peace was there, because God granted it. It is peace that passes all understanding. “It will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ.”

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The idea of guarding pictures for us the theme of God’s peace being a soldier, a sentinel, patrolling our hearts. We may picture ourselves inside a castle and God’s peace is on patrol, guarding us in life. God provides His peace.

Then Paul recommends a practice that will help us to deal with the concern of conflict. That practice is controlling our thought life. “Finally, brothers [and there again is the second time Paul has said “finally.” He said it first in 3:1, when he was only halfway through the letter. Now he still isn’t through, but he’s saying it again], 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. 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” (Philippians 4:8–9, NIV).

Attitudes play a critical role in our life. Paul says that our language should pass through some tests, and our thought life should pass some tests. Before we communicate knowledge about someone else, we ought to ask, is it true? And just because something is true doesn’t mean we ought to dwell on it or pass it on to someone else. There are a lot of things about people that I know are true, but I really wouldn’t want to reveal to someone else. Because it is not honorable or because the information I know is not pure. Or the information I have is not lovely. Or it’s not excellent. Or it’s not admirable. Or it’s not commendable.

Therefore, Paul takes us—in our thought life—beyond those things which are true, to those additional tests which focus our mind upon the things which are helpful. We can always believe the worst in people, or we can believe the best in people. Paul is definitely putting us on a track that focuses our life on believing the best about people. Instead of guessing about what their

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worst intentions might be, try to find something that would suggest that they had good intentions for what they did. It's a key to a healthy mental life.

So Paul expresses a concern out of Euodia and Syntyche's disagreement. And he expresses the need for realizing the presence of the Lord and recommending the practice of monitoring one's thought life.

II. Then, in verses 10–19, he goes past concern to describe the contentment in his own heart.

“I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:10–19, NIV).

There's contentment in his heart. He acknowledges this contentment for the Philippians and their gifts to him that had been sent more than once. I think it's the only church that has been recorded

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as having sent Paul gifts. But he gives this little revelatory statement, “I have learned to be content” (verse 11). It would be nice if we could give out the gift of spiritual contentment. If I or one of the elders could simply lay hands on you and give to you the gift of being contented. And maybe there is a place in prayer where there can be an instant healing—I’m not suggesting there can’t be. But, by and large, contentment is not a gift that is given charismatically to someone. It is not a gift that just happens automatically because some day you get up and go, “I finally feel like it’s all together!” Paul says that contentment is something we learn, and it’s the state in which we live. “I have learned to be content no matter what the circumstances are.”

So I ask myself the question, how do you learn to be content? And by watching a process that is at work in Paul’s life and that I see God at work in my own life, I have about five steps that I have seen to bring contentment in life.

A. The first thing, it seems to me, that one has to look at in being content is you have to squarely face the things that would make you discontented. Being content doesn’t mean that you are unaware of what’s happening around you, or choose to sweep everything under the carpet and pretend like it doesn’t exist. A contented person learns to face reality and know what’s out there that’s causing them such discontent and to identify it.

B. Secondly, I must distinguish those things that I am to have a righteous discontent over, and the other things that I’m simply to accept and be content over. “I have learned to be content” doesn’t mean that we become laid back about all things. There are some things that call us to alarm, that call us to spiritual warfare, that call us to intercessory prayer, that call us out into the streets, even to demonstrate. Paul is not divorcing righteous anger and justice from the Christian’s personality. We need to distinguish between those things for which we should have a godly discontent and seek to change the situation.

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It was the evangelicals who protested over the slave trade that changed things around. I think it's going to be evangelicals in our day who change the devastation that liquor is causing people. The average American is drinking some thirty some gallons of it a year. Our nation is a sea in chaos of chemically and liquid-induced states of euphoria that deprive one from living with their full mental capacity and full senses. There are some things we need to be discontented over. May God help me to be discontented with the things I should. But there are many things that would get me upset that the Lord says are not worth being upset over.

C. Then I think a third step to being content is being realistic and expect that there are going to be rough waters in life. And there are going to be some negatives. I'm realistic, I'm not expecting a Pollyanna kind of world therefore, where everything is going to work just the way I want it. But I'm prepared for a lot of disappointment—or at least some.

D. Then a fourth step that I have to take, if I'm going to be content, is I have to locate happiness within me. No one can make me happy. If I live with the assumption that “if somehow I could just change the people in my life or change the circumstances in my life” I will never be content, for I will never sufficiently remake people in the image that I want them. I can never do that. And you can never do that. You will never be able to totally change the person you're closest to, let alone the people that are further away from you. You can never change people to the degree you want them to be changed. Nor can you make all your circumstances as pleasant as you would like them to be. So if my happiness is left to things outside of myself, I will never be content. Instead, I must find it, with God's help, from within and let His Spirit work on me from within. Then I can be content.

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E. Fifthly, if I just learn to relax in God’s hands. When things aren’t going as I would want, I just need to take a walk and yield myself to His sovereignty and say, “Lord, You know. You’re guiding my life, and You’re helping me, and You’ll see me even through this.”

I’m sure that there are a lot more steps to contentment than these five. But it seems to me that these are some essentials in the life of contentment. Paul says, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13, NIV). As I pointed out before in earlier messages, there were a lot of things Paul could not do at that particular moment. He could not be released from Caesar’s judicial system. He could not be released from the bonds, the chains that he was in—even though people were praying for him to be released. He could not suddenly have a life of ease and comfort that was not open to him. But he still says, “I can do everything.” What he means in saying, “I can do everything,” is, “This is the most difficult thing that God ever laid upon me. Being in prison for five years [as he has been when he writes this letter] is the most difficult thing I’ve ever been called to do. Yet I have found that God helps me do even this. And if I can do this, I can do anything that God lays upon me. ”

III. That is an attitude that makes for contentment. Then we come to the last moments of this letter to the Philippians.

Verses 20–23, which is the conclusion to the letter.

“Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen” (Philippians 4:21–23, NIV).

Paul, as a Christian, never neglects the rudimentary courtesies of life. He starts his letter courteously, as any Greek would start a letter in those days, by first of all naming himself and then giving greetings. Paul chooses to give greetings that are invested with Christian meaning.

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“Grace to you and peace.” And likewise, the closing of his letter speaks of his humanness and his civility and his kindness as a gentleman and as a human being. Like all letter writers of the time, he turns to extend greetings to others. This time, he is asking that all the saints be greeted, because this letter will be read in public and the greeting will then be shared. People in the audience will look at one another and nod. Then he will say something very remarkable. He evidently can’t say much about it. It would be wonderful if he could have given us a letter that would have had all the testimonials of this phrase that is so invested with hidden meaning. He says, “The saints here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar’s household” (verse 22). What he is saying through that, really, is that in his time of imprisonment, he has loved members of the administration of Caesar to Christ. He has led soldiers and perhaps lawyers and perhaps a judge or two to Christ. Now they are able to greet their fellow saints in Philippi. God has accomplished a work of fruitfulness in his time of difficulty.

I don’t know where this letter to the Philippians has found you in your life. I trust for some it has found you in a time of difficulty. I trust, as you have heard these closing moments, that you will reflect some upon the difficulty that you are passing through. It may seem to you that what you’re in is a dead-end street, and there’s not a lot of hope for you and not a lot of sunshine coming through. But in the midst of Paul’s prison experience, he is able to reflect upon the things that have been gained because of the circumstances that he was in. God is at work gaining things for us in our times of difficulty. If we’ll let the Lord do that and be content in that and rejoice in that and recognize that it will help us greatly and it will encourage other people to live for Christ. Joy. Joy in the place I’m in. Joy and the people I’m with. Joy and the person I am. Joy in any circumstances. These are the watchwords of Paul’s Philippian letter.

Closing Prayer

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Now, our Father, we come to these closing moments of prayer, where we ask that Your joy will be full among us. We recognize, in serving You, that there are all kinds of expressions for joy. Some kind of joy is the loud and boisterous and happy joy of a party and a good time. Another kind of joy reflects simply an inward spirit of being at rest. Saying, “Lord, I’m really pleased with where I am right now. I’m pleased with who I’m with. I’m pleased with the circumstances You’ve surrounded me with. I’m happy that You’re working in me. I want to be just the right person with the right people, at the right place, at the right time. There are things outside me that do not seem right to me. I’d like to change all those things. Forbid me, Lord, from so doing. Help me instead to see Your grace change me, so that I can be Your man or your woman where I am, and be joyful in my place of life. Joyful no matter what. Eternally grateful and thankful in You.”

Bring that real joy into our lives, we pray, in Christ’s name. Amen.