

**The Paradox of Worry and Contentment**  
**Philippians 4:4-13**  
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How would you define worry? What kinds of things do you worry about?

Can you imagine life without worry? Do you wish you worried less? Does that sound reasonable or even possible to you? Do you think that is what Paul is advocating when he tells the church at Philippi “do not worry about anything?”

Personally, telling myself not to worry is a lot like telling a dieter they can’t have any of the foods that they love the most—like the year I gave up chocolate for Lent. It was not pretty, and trust me, I have not, nor will I ever repeat it. Trying to deny our worry is not an effective strategy for dealing with it. Instead, like the person changing their food habits to develop better health, we have to gradually deal with our worry habit by replacing patterns that aren’t helpful with other patterns and choices that are healthier and more beneficial. Paul seems to be aware of that, because that is exactly the counsel that he offers the Philippians.

As we’ve seen throughout this series, Paul believes that because of knowing Christ, Christians can deal with difficult things because we have a resource, a secret weapon, if you will, and that is the resurrection power of Christ. Paul offers three ways to tap into that power to help us deal with our worry. The first one is **prayer**. Prayer is the ultimate anecdote to worry, and if you’re serious about worrying less, then prayer is not optional; it is an absolute necessity. In my own experience, I have found that prayer effects change in my patterns of worry in three ways: First, **prayer reorients us**. It changes the lens through which we view our circumstances and those areas that we think require our incessant fretfulness. Prayer invites us to step into to God’s presence and see our lives and the world as God sees them—to see everything with God’s wisdom, with God’s love, and with God’s power, trusting that that power is available and at work in the very situation that so concerns us.

Second, **prayer reminds us to be praising, thankful people**—Paul doesn’t just say it once; he says it twice. “Rejoice in the Lord; again I will say, rejoice.” Why would Paul put so much emphasis on this? And, what does it have to do with worry? The act of rejoicing, in both personal and corporate prayer, is an act that acknowledges that God is present. It forces us to remember that we are not alone.

It also reminds us that we are not the center of the universe. So often, our worry isolates us. It tricks us into believing that no one else has these problems we're facing, no one else knows what we're going through, no one else knows what this feels like. In short, worry turns us inward, but rejoicing before the Lord lifts our head up. When we celebrate who God is, when we name the attributes of God, when we thank God for what the Divine Love has already done in our lives, remembering God's faithfulness to us in the past, it puts our current worry in perspective. In fact, it is very difficult to simultaneously rejoice and wring our hands in worry.

Third, **prayer gets us on God's timing**. We humans are impatient creatures. We operate on chronos time, driven by the relentless movement of the clock, on a schedule that demands that everything be done yesterday. God, however, is on kairos time. God is never rushed, never in a hurry and has all eternity in which to accomplish God's purposes. Paul says the Lord is near. Eternity has begun. Thus, your frantic worrying is unnecessary. God is here and God's ultimate plan is already in motion. There is nothing too great for God's power and nothing too small for God's care. You can trust that God is acting right on time.

It has been my experience that prayer can be difficult. As Christians we know we should pray, and we feel guilty if we don't pray enough or pray more often or pray consistently. So, we resolve to do better, and in doing so, we become like dieters who go whole hog on the latest fad in weight reduction. We try to do too much, too fast, setting goals that are unrealistic. So, predictably we fail, and then we feel more guilt, and the whole cycle continues. If you struggle to have a meaningful prayer discipline, I encourage you to start, but start small. Don't set a goal to get up half an hour early for a daily quiet time. Set aside 5 minutes. Or, deliberately turn off the radio in your car and talk to God as you sit in traffic. Or visualize God next to you while you garden or wash dishes. Honestly name what you're worried about, but also thank God for already being aware of it and already being in the middle of it. And don't forget to count your blessings. Rejoice in God's faithfulness to you in the past. And, hand over your present concerns. Picture yourself putting those issues into God's loving embrace. Just 5 minutes. It can begin to change your worry habit.

In addition to prayer, there is a second area that requires attention if we're going to deal with worry, and that is our **thoughts**. Paul exhorts the Philippians to take care about where they allow their mind to dwell. Guard your thoughts, he says. Don't take anything for granted, but safeguard your mind. It is a proactive stance, one in which we take responsibility for the things we allow ourselves to

focus on. I have one relative who is like a dog with a bone when it comes to worrying. She carries worry around wherever she goes, takes it out continually to chew on it, fret over it, and turn it over again and again. Maybe you know someone like that or maybe you are that someone.

Paul reminds us there's another way. Look for what is good and right, he says. Dwell on what's true and honorable. Focus your mind on that which builds up, not on that which tears down. One of the problems with worry is that it keeps us from appreciating and being grateful for what we have, for what is good, for what's going right in our lives. Worry, if we don't discipline ourselves to bring balance and perspective to our mindset, acts like a microscope that zeroes in on just the problems. It keeps our eyes cast down and we forget to look up to see the beauty and good that is also part of our lives.

In addition to guarding our thoughts and praying, a third anecdote to worry involves our **action**. Paul says, "keep on DOING the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me." And, what are those things? As we've seen in the last three weeks of this sermon series, the Philippians have witnessed Paul react with praise while in prison. They've heard him preach the Gospel in the face of persecution. They've seen him put his confidence in Christ, not in his background or good works. They've learned from him what it means to be a servant rather than seek greatness. They've watched him willingly lay down everything of value, even his life, in order to pursue knowing Christ. In short, they have seen him walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

Paul had plenty to worry about. Somebody was always hot on his tail, ready to beat him or stone him or throw him in jail. He was planting fledgling churches in every town he visited, and when he left them, he had no idea how they would fare. Frequently the reports were not exactly what he was hoping to hear—disagreements erupted, false doctrine seeped in, divisions threatened to undo the work he had started. Paul was not without his concerns anymore than we are. But, Paul's faith was in Christ, and because of that, his choices, the daily decisions he made about how to respond to the worries he faced, were grounded in faith, not just the emotion of the moment.

Those faithful choices—to pray, to guard his thoughts and to act in accordance with his trust in Christ—allowed Paul to experience the peace of God and find contentment in his situation, whatever that situation happened to be at the time. Contentment is a pretty elusive quality in our lives. Our culture certainly doesn't promote it, the Madison Avenue marketing gurus actively pursue making

us discontent, and our own human nature works against us, as we constantly compare ourselves to others. We suffer from what is sometimes called “the Lake Wobegon effect.” Did you know there was a name for it? Lake Wobegon—you know, that legendary idyllic Wisconsin town woven into story by Garrison Keillor for *A Prairie Home Companion*—is the place where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” But, what happens if we’re not particularly strong or not especially good looking or maybe just average, not above average?

Comparing ourselves to others is a sure “contentment killer.” Other killers to our peace and contentment include buying into the myth of the greener grass. Envy and greed will make us discontent, as will unrealistic goals or expectations. Toxic people will also keep us discontent.

As Paul uses the word, contentment is not dependent on our circumstances. It does not mean loving everything just the way it is. It also does not mean a lack of drive or desire to succeed. It’s not fatalism. And, it’s not an excuse for laziness. Instead, when Paul talks about contentment, he’s describing a choice, the choice to handle whatever comes his way. If he is shipwrecked, he is content, that is, he can handle it because he trusts God in that situation. If he is short on food or money, he is content. He can handle it because he trusts God to provide. So, there is no need to worry. God is good and God’s grace is sufficient. What is required of Paul is to wait expectantly and patiently to see how God will act in his present circumstance.

In the meantime, while he waits to see what God will do, Paul prays. He guards his thoughts. And, he acts in ways that are consistent with his faith in God. In fact, Paul is so certain of God that in verse 13 he makes an awfully bold declaration: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Look at the context and what Paul is talking about. This verse is about contentment, not success. When it is pulled out of context, it has been given all kinds of meanings, but what Paul is actually saying is that regardless of his situation, he can handle anything through the power of Christ who gives him strength.

For Paul and for us, contentment is both an attitude and a choice. We can wring our hands in worry as if we are alone and have no power or resources but our own with which to face our lives. Or, we can be at peace, content in knowing that God is on our side, and therefore, we can handle whatever comes. Worry or contentment? The choice is yours. Amen.