

Rejoice in the Lord!

Messages from Philippians

Leader's Guide

This is a four lesson study of the messages of Philippians as they apply to the 21st century. The lessons can be used as a group or independently. Each lesson should take about an hour to complete. It is written to elicit discussion to enhance the understanding of these precious words of Paul.

Dear Leader: The comments in italics are meant as an aide in helping you lead the discussion. Let people respond to the questions and use the comments to prompt new ideas that may not have been covered. These comments are not necessarily “the answers” and may not be inclusive of all the comments the ladies will bring up. The objective is to have much discussion of the concepts and application to our lives. All Bible references are to Philippians unless otherwise stated. Be sure to get input from both those over 30 and our Millennial and younger sisters as they may well have different perspectives and responses.

Written by Marilyn Miller, retired Staff Minister, and reviewed for theological accuracy by Prof. James Westendorf.

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Letting Christ Define your life

Opening Prayer

1. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say "thy will be done." God's will is that the gospel is preached, all people are saved and we live holy lives. It follows then that each of us who pray this would want to do all we can to help make this happen. This is neither a small nor an easy task. With some thought, one can easily see how this mission could consume every minute, every thought and every resource of every day. With God's help, all is possible. For the next hour we will talk about the breadth of God's will and how we can spur one another on to commit our lives to fulfilling his will.
2. Read 1:9-11. Put Paul's words into your own words. How does this growth happen?

Paul's prayer is that the Philippians might grow in faith as well as their desire and ability to bring forth the fruits of that faith in words and actions of love. Faith grows through the means of grace, Word and Sacrament. The more intense our study of Scripture, the more our faith grows and the more committed we become to letting that faith direct our lives, putting aside our own will. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit as he creates and strengthens faith.

3. How easy is it to let everyone with whom you come into contact know you are a follower of Christ? What are some of the struggles and barriers?

Focus the discussion on "everyone" for a while. Standing out from the crowd is sometimes uncomfortable and social pressure encourages us to be quiet, join the crowd, or shrink away. We sometimes don't want to "make a scene" or Satan makes us feel as if this isn't the time or place. Some employers forbid religious words, apparel, or jewelry with threats of discipline. All kinds of barriers—but our God is Lord of all and Conqueror of all. With him walking beside us, we begin to see fewer and fewer barriers and how to be wise in each situation. With Jesus always walking beside us, we are encouraged to let our words and actions mark us as his followers. While focusing on our goal of heaven we are better able to lead our lives without focusing on the perceived worldly negatives that come straight from Satan.

4. What life encouragement does Paul give us in the following passages:
 - a. Read 1:12-15

Paul has the ultimate positive attitude. He sees absolutely everything, including his imprisonment, as a way to spread the gospel because he sees no barriers to the work. He is not fearful but trusts that God will care for him as he serves his Savior. He is not intimidated. His complete focus on his work and complete trust in God for his earthly care serves as a model for us. He spreads the gospel message without fear for his earthly well-being.

b. Read 1:27-28

We know the love of God and his grace that he pours into our lives. This is a certainty in all situations. God's grace gives us courage to stand firm. We are usually careful how we conduct ourselves because what we do and say reflects on our reputation and good name and that of our family. Paul is asking us, even more, to conduct ourselves in a way that reflects positively on God's name, with whom we have sworn our allegiance. There is power in numbers, and we have Christian brothers and sisters who will stand up for the gospel truths along beside us. Do not be frightened but lean on God, lean on your Christian friends. Be brave. Picture Jesus as a great warrior walking beside us and know that he has already won the battle for us.

c. Read 1:29-30

Set the proper expectations—know that Christians will struggle and suffer in this world. Scripture tells us this over and over. Just as Jesus suffered in this world, so will those who profess to be his followers. We don't need to shrink away but confidently and courageously carry out our struggle, knowing that the Lord is on our side. Think of those in our world who are tortured and killed because they would not deny their faith. Pray for them. Use them as models of faith. Think of Jesus' struggles on earth and use him as a model. Know that Jesus has already won the battle for us. Daily ask God to "let your holy angels be with me that the wicked foe may have no power over me" from Luther's Morning Prayer. Focus on heaven and know that God will lead us there.

5. Paul states the very purpose of a Christian's life when he asks the Philippians to be shining stars in a dark world. Read 2:12-16a. How can you be a shining star? What can help you keep your star shining brightly every day?

As we live according to our Christian values and morals, we live a life set apart from the rest of the world. Our words and actions make it obvious that we have a different value system than others and this is noticed. Sometimes we are ridiculed but at the same time we quietly go about building bridges that create opportunities to share the hope we have in the gospel.

It is important that our faith shines all the time because the rest of the world sees inconsistencies and uses them to form an opinion about our God, right along with all the things we want to say about him. God uses our actions to help society and be a blessing to many, believers and unbelievers alike. We live in the world but are not of the world. This is something that goes on until our salvation is complete in heaven (meaning of "work out our salvation" in vs 12).

Know that God already has a plan for each of us to serve him wherever we find ourselves and it is he who gives us the ability to accomplish his desires. Let us ask God, each day, to help us accomplish his will while putting our own aside. Another passage that might be helpful to meditate upon is Romans 12:1-2 "Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, to offer your bodies as living

sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...do not conform any longer to the ways of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

6. Just in case you're thinking that you are really pretty good at this and this message might be more for others than for you, Paul has a message for you. He had exceptional credentials as a Jew of the highest order. Read 3:7-11 and discuss how he viewed his credentials and what this means for you.

Paul saw his credentials as worthless, as trash, as things that could easily lead him away from Christ. He threw them out! It is very easy for us to take pride in our degrees, jobs, fame, gifts, bank account, or accomplishments. Pride leads us to quickly take the path they lead to, putting our trust in them and in ourselves instead of in God. They so easily begin to set the priorities in our lives leaving little or no time, energy or resources to accomplish God's will. Out of sight, out of mind takes over. For Paul, knowing and following Christ was the highest goal imaginable.

What things might be standing in your way to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus?

7. In 3:12-14 Paul pictures his life as a race. What principles of running a race might prove helpful to you as you make decisions and set priorities, both big and small?
- *A runner who takes his eyes off the goal tends to wander from the path and lose. (We have one goal and that is heaven. Earthly distractions, anything that doesn't take us closer to that goal, keep us from reaching the goal.)*
 - *A runner wears the proper shoes and clothes so as not to slow down and get tangled in his clothing. (We have the perfect equipment for our race and this is God's Word, no more and no less. Some do not use Scripture at all or add/delete what pleases them leaving them wandering and guessing.)*
 - *A runner practices regularly so that he is in good condition and can handle difficulties along the way. (We have the blessing of daily Bible study, weekly worship, and the Sacraments, all of which keep us in prime condition to handle the bumps this world throws at us and the difficult decisions we are called upon to make. Those without these wonderful tools must depend on themselves alone—a very lonely and shaky position.)*
 - *A runner has coaches and friends who help him be successful (We have pastors, teachers, Christian friends who help us train and give us encouragement. They notice those little things that get in the way of winning and help us correct them. A life without these gifts is indeed a sad thing.)*
8. What one or two things are you going to do differently based on our study today?

"I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength." (4:13). What an amazing gift of grace!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (4:23)

Christian Friends, an Indispensable Blessing

Opening Prayer

1. Paul opens his letter to the Philippians with “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (1:3-5). Paul cherished the people at the Philippi church, this is obvious from his letter. How much do you also cherish the other Christians in your life? Your pastor? Congregation members? Christians around the world? How do you show it?

Answers will vary. We can demonstrate how much these people mean to us by telling them, praying for them and with them, encouraging them, helping them, studying with them, being there at times of difficulty, sharing our time and resources with them, weeping and laughing with them....

2. What makes Christian friends different than non-Christian friends? Maybe consider 1:7 in your discussion.

When the gospel enters human hearts and joins sinful human beings to Christ by faith, it changes people's lives. It moves and empowers human beings, who previously lived only for themselves, to live in love to God and to all people. We are one in Christ, sharing the same gifts of God's grace, forgiveness of sins, and the hope of heaven. Christian friends are not as likely to lead us astray and much more likely to pull us back from sin. They can encourage us with God's promises and help us grow in faith. Through the means of grace we experience the joy of growing together in the maturity faith. We look forward to being in heaven with our Christian friends.

3. Read 1:27-28. Why is it important that Christians “stand firm in one spirit?”

Scripture tells us many places that God wants us to live together in unity. We sing hymns about the blessings of unity. Satan is powerful and fiercely attacks believers and those who stand alone are exceptionally vulnerable. Satan will do anything to keep the gospel from being spread—our very purpose for being in this world. A community of believers has much more power to withstand his many attacks. We can come together, confidently and courageously facing the struggle against Satan, knowing that the Lord is on our side.

When have you been blessed to “stand firm in one spirit” with your congregation or your Christian family and friends? Have these experiences made your life richer and more joyful?

Support of mission work, our Christian schools including the seminary, a personal trial, joy of seeing new people come to church, baptisms of children and adults, our children singing for worship....

4. What are some of the things that help us stand together? (2:1-4)

We meditate on and remember why we want to stand together—because we are united in Christ, are comforted by his love, and are recipients of his tenderness and compassion. Keeping these blessings in our mind, we can imitate God’s love in our relationship toward one another. When we realize God has forgiven others just as he has forgiven you, it is easier to forgive and reconcile differences. When we see each other as equally saved, we can be humble and treat others as God has treated you. Living a Christian life is not a competition, but a team effort.

5. In 3:17 and also 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul says it is important to have someone to imitate. This is a natural human behavior—just look how fads and styles come and go, that celebrity t-shirt or shoes the kids must have, the heroes people follow and talk about. Why is it important for Christians to have Christ-focused mentors? Who do you use as a mentor?

We are surrounded by pagan immorality and false teachers. Those who don’t live for Christ see no problem imitating those without Christian values. Without strong Christians to look at, we can easily fall for the ways of the world. Fifty years ago, most families remained close to each other and the family unit could act as a valuable influence. Today families often don’t live in the same state or even same country. The Christian family picks up where the family unit no longer has as much influence. In this day of broken marriages, couples who openly love each other and are faithful to each other set an example that may be a rarity. Single mothers often look for a Christian man to help her teach a child what a good man looks like.

How can we teach our children and young adults the difference between friends and Christian friends?

Is this something that needs to be taught? Is this where parents need to help their children learn the difference? Help them be discerning? Help them understand the value of Christian friends? Does the church youth group play a role? What happens when they choose the wrong person as “best friend?” Open up the discussion and pray that God blesses them with a faithful friend who also loves and lives for Jesus.

6. Paul cherished the fellowship he had with the Philippians. What are some of the blessings that come from our being in Christian fellowship with one another? What’s the greatest one for you?

We worship together, not as an individual but as a group. We enjoy the gifts of others that fill our worship and the encouragement we get from sharing the pew with other sinners going through the same struggles as we are. We join in the Lord’s Supper together. We join together to open and support missions. We gain new insight into Scripture as we study together or sit at the feet of a pastor. We have someone who will weep, laugh, pray with us, or give us a hug or a helping hand. We have someone who truly cares about our soul and will lovingly call us back from sin.

7. What might you change in your life based on this study?

I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength. (4:13). What an amazing gift of grace! The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (4:23)

Humility – Following Jesus' Example

Opening Prayer

1. Be honest, do you consider yourself humble? Is being humble valued by our culture?

Someone who is humble is seen as weak in our society, is often ridiculed and left behind when it comes to promotions and pay raise. Their opinions aren't sought or listened to. We're told to sell ourselves, to stand up for ourselves and this does not link well with humility.

2. Read 2:1-4 carefully. Paul is clearly advocating humility and it seems unconditional. What makes Christian humility different than the worldly humility we just talked about? Consider what we can learn from the role of humility in the life of Moses. (Num 12:3 – “Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”)

Paul asks us to remember the Father's love for us, what Christ has done for us and the faith that grows in our heart through the Holy Spirit. As we serve him and interact with others, this is to be our frame of mind. Moses was a brave leader while facing Pharaoh, leading the people away from Pharaoh's army through the Red Sea, through the desert to the point of entering the Promised Land. He did this confident of God's calling and seeking God's will and support. He desired to do whatever God asked him to do. He was confident that it was God's power alone that enabled him to do it and that He was always in control. God's will shone in his life, not his own will.

3. How can you reconcile the worldly definition of humility and what Paul tells us? Must I always show Christian humility in all areas of my life? You might consider Paul's comments in Colossians 4:5-6 in your discussion.

Paul is basing his definition of humility on shared Christian values and blessings. In our homes and church we are definitely called to Christian humility and unity, not struggling for position, pride, superiority, power. Rather tenderness, compassion, working together in joy, focusing on a common goal of living to Christ's glory defines our attitudes.

The secular world does not accept Christ or accept the values that are dear to him. We can't demand that they do. Therefore worldly humility, seen as weakness, will look different than Christian humility, seen as essential especially in times of opposition and struggle. We are not called upon to become doormats, letting everyone run over us. On the other hand, an attitude of humility does let our light shine in the darkened world and serves as a witness to the God that we profess. When and how much humility is a matter for careful prayer as we balance the many principles of Christian living that God provides. Even when being more assertive, the other attributes of Christian life (tenderness, compassion, faithfulness, joyful perspective...) are always called for. We are comforted that God-like thinking leads to God-like acting.

4. Now, with our Christian mindset, let's look at Jesus' perfect example of humility. Read 2:5-8. Jesus, from eternity, has always been the all-powerful, all-knowing God of the universe. Yet, at his incarnation, he became fully human as well, though he never gave up his divine attributes. He used them on this earth as he fed the multitude, walked on water, healed the ill, raised people from the dead, and more, but he never used them for his own aggrandizement. To grasp Christ's perfect example of humility, let's fill in the following table based on the verses we just read.

	Our Selfishness	Selflessness of Christ
2:6	<i>Our pride and sense of achievement, often our welfare comes from our ability to climb high and higher. For this, the world praises and rewards us.</i>	<i>God of the Universe yet willingly made himself nothing—It has been compared to a human taking on the life of a slug—not a pretty thought. Christ willingly climbed lower and lower putting aside the glory and praise that was his as Almighty God.</i>
2:7	<i>Though valuable, servants are often seen as the lower end of our social structure. Who would willingly move from a prestigious position to become a servant? Egos would suffer significantly.</i>	<i>Though King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus willingly lived a life as a servant</i>
2:8	<i>We accept that we will die, but certainly not die in humiliation while being treated as the vilest criminal and subjected to an inhumane death sentence. We'd be hiring the best lawyer we could find.</i>	<i>Willingly accepted torture, humiliation, a death reserved only for the worst of criminals. All without wavering or even defending himself.</i>

What do you notice about Jesus' example of humility that we are asked to imitate?

It wasn't enough that he stepped down into humanity from being treated with all the majesty of God, he took on the position of a person held in low esteem, and then he stepped down even lower to die like a criminal. He just kept going down and down and down. It sets an enormously high bar for us. I can't even begin to take on that level of humility. Only with God's help can I even begin that journey.

5. Paul seems to have laid out an impossible task for us. But we can't just throw up our hands and give up. When looking at anyone as someone to imitate, it helps if we get to know that person very, very well so that we can understand their motivation and how they think, not just what they do. Name some of the ways we can get to know Jesus better, more intimately, and how you think this will help develop your Christian humility.

We don't want to just know who Jesus is, as we know who the mayor is. We want to know him deeply, as we know our spouse or a dear friend.

- *God has given us his Scripture so that we can know him and what pleases him. Daily time in Scripture is needed as we study and study again who God is, giving the Holy Spirit the opportunity to strengthen our faith.*
 - *As we daily meditate on God's agape love for us that led him to send his Son to secure our salvation, we grow closer to him, we thank and praise him, we desire to lead lives that praise and serve him*
 - *As we remember our baptism, we are reminded that we have been given power over the ways of Satan and this world. As we daily drown Satan we are raised up as the new (wo)man that we are through the Holy Spirit. There is great power in our baptism.*
 - *As we participate in the Lord's Supper we ingest the very body and blood of our Savior, giving us forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. This strengthens us as we go about our daily lives to live according to God's will.*
 - *As we worship, we are rejuvenated by God's Word by being reminded of God's truths, by confessing our sins and hearing the words of absolution, by hearing how his truths affect our lives and decisions, by singing his praises, by praying side by side with others who face the same struggles that we do.*
 - *As we surround ourselves with like-minded Christian friends, we encourage one another in our daily struggles and rejoice with one another as we grow closer to our Savior. We gently reprimand each other in love and hold each other's hand in support.*
 - *We pray that God will continually strengthen our faith and give us the ability to honor him in all we do.*
6. One last thought. Read 2:9-11. We do not develop humility so that it can be seen as something good. Then we are no longer humble but proud! We do not earn a share of Christ's glory through our lowliness and suffering for Jesus' sake. Our salvation is a free gift through grace. The life of Jesus life shows a journey from humility to glory as he now sits in heaven and every knee bows to him. How can the life of a humble, self-sacrificing Christian also be identified as a path from humility to glory?

Life is a continual struggle in this world. Though Scripture we are given a glimpse of what heaven will be like and this is our focus and encouragement. Someday, Jesus will return and take us to heaven to be with him and to live eternity in perfection. The pains and difficulties of this world will be gone forever. How glorious this will be!

"I can do all things through Christ, who gives me strength." (4:13). What an amazing gift of grace!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (4:23)

Rejoice Always! Really?

Opening Prayer

1. Are you a half full or half empty type of person? Why?

Answers may vary. Encourage discussion.

Though Paul's life at this time didn't reflect a physical situation that we would usually describe as joyful, he packs his letter, these few pages of Scripture, with many reasons why his joy was genuine and not dampened by the physical situation in which he found himself. Let's see why he could agree with David, the Psalmist, in saying his cup is overflowing (Ps 23:5).

2. Read 1:3-5 and 1:12-14 and 1:18. What is one of the major reasons Paul rejoices? How did he turn his "lemons into lemonade," i.e., his imprisonment in a Roman prison, into a blessing?

Paul rejoiced that the gospel was being spread. He rejoices that those he taught in Philippi have continued to grow in faith and the desire to share it with others so that souls are saved. He also rejoices that his imprisonment has given him the unique opportunity to share the gospel with his guards and others he comes into contact with, a group that may have been more difficult to reach had he not been imprisoned for his dedication to Christ and his Kingdom. The example he is setting is also encouraging others in the family of faith to be bolder in their witness.

Discuss what this means for you and what it would take for you to develop or strengthen a joyful attitude in all things.

Study Scripture, daily meditate on what the gospel means to you and count the blessings it has brought into your life. Participate in outreach efforts. Ask your pastor to teach you how to share your faith with family and friends. Ask God to help you identify those in your circles that need to know Jesus and give you the opportunity and courage to share with them. Bring friends to church. Learn about our home and world mission efforts and pray for them, support them. Build a support group with whom you can share the joy of spreading the gospel and who encourage one another. Greet worship visitors, learn something about them, let them see your joy, call them by name next time you see them. Let the light of the gospel shine wherever you are in this world so that people will see you have different values than this world and thus build a bridge to share why.

I commit to include the following in my life to help me be joyful in all situations because the gospel is being spread in this world.

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3. Read 3:1-3, 3:7-9. What is another of the major reasons Paul rejoices? How does he describe it?

Paul gets his true joy in the strength of God alone. He rejects strength offered by other religions, relying on himself, relying on his credentials, finances, achievement, or skills. In fact any confidence that comes from anything other than God he sees as rubbish (manure) that leads us away from Christ and weaken us.

Looking at our own lives, we're much more comfortable when we have a decent balance in our savings account, a degree or career and a source of income, a good health, healthy relationships with those close to us, etc. What might help you see your cup overflowing with joy even in very difficult situations? What Bible promises might you lean on?

In our world of opulence and excess (especially compared to many parts of the world) this may become difficult especially because it goes so far against the American world view. Putting confidence in God alone takes practice. Prayer is good place to start. Maybe we could consciously focus on the difference between need and want, getting rid of some of our "stuff", increasing our offerings of time and treasure to the Lord while claiming less for ourselves, refocusing our priorities, becoming more genuinely thankful. Maybe we could start a journal, always finishing an entry with something for which you are thankful. A support group of Christian friends can be helpful as they reinforce God's love and compassion. We could make God more of a focus every day with time in his Word and a conscious effort to live for him alone, leaning on him alone.

I commit to include the following in my life to help me build my strength in God alone:

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- 4 Read 3:10-4:1. What is yet another of the major reasons Paul rejoices? How does he describe it?

Paul knows his salvation is secure and that his citizenship is in heaven where there will be eternal joy. He doesn't focus on the things of this earth but rather on the true goal: eternity in heaven. This allows him to look beyond the problems and difficulties of this world as he focuses on the big picture. As he compares our lives to the race of an athlete, Paul knows that those who take their eye off the goal lose. He compares our lives to a journey as we travel toward the home of our true citizenship in heaven. Our journey may be harsh or pleasant, but reaching the destination is what is important. Even death does not trouble him because he knows our bodies will be transformed and there will be no sin or weakness when we live out perfection in heaven. And the hope of this destination fills him with joy and peace every day of the journey.

Discuss what this means for you and what it would take for you to develop or strengthen your continual focus on heaven.

Developing/strengthening this focus on heaven takes a change in our priorities, a change in our life goals, a discipline to look at the big picture and not what's going on right now. It takes regular (daily) study of Scripture. We ask the Holy Spirit to teach us to carefully evaluate what the world tells us and check it against what God tells us. Christian friends who remind us of this focus are very

helpful. We must be aware that the world we live in will not value our point of view and we may suffer loss or embarrassment, but we are to live as strangers here on earth—we're only travelling though.

I commit to include the following in my life to help me focus on the end goal of life in heaven rather than the journey here on earth:

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5. Read 4:4-9. Paul asks that we replace any anxiety with joy. Why?

We can see life in a much clearer perspective if we don't focus on problems but rather on all the reasons for joy that he has shared thus far—our sins are forgiven, God is always in charge and he will work all things out for our good, and Jesus will be coming back soon to take us to be with him. Alleluia! Picturing our Savior sitting in heaven at the right hand of the Father builds a yearning in our heart to be right there with him.

Paul links joy and gentleness in verses 4 and 5. We do not always let our gentleness be on display, but why do you think Paul says it should be?

Paul sees joy as a fundamental characteristic of Christianity, always. Outward circumstances do not determine the condition of the heart. As we hone our hearts and lives to be more an imitation of Paul and Christ by always focusing on what God has done for us, gentleness will become a natural response. A heart filled with gentleness and peace because of God's great gifts, will naturally want to live a life that pleases God. It won't be hard.

6. In verse 4:6 Paul tells us prayer and thanksgiving are tools that help us be joyful always. In 4:11b-13 he gives us one more tool—be content. What is his secret to being content?

It has nothing to do with living in plenty or in want but with unswaying confidence that he can do anything while leaning on Christ, who gives him strength. He has promised that he will care for us, will keep us safe and will give us everything we need to do what he has planned for us to accomplish. Let us put worldly values aside and take God at his word. What peace this gives us.

7. On your own, think of someone who always appears gentle and content with their lot in life. Do they also display a strong faith? Consciously attempt to use them as a mentor as you work on displaying joy *always*.

All of this is ours, through grace.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (4:23)