

Joy Robbers
Philippians 4:2-9
Part 8—Choose Joy

Introduction

Over the years I've noticed a pattern in how God works in my life. Whenever I'm going to speak about a particular topic God first allows me to personally experience it. I need to tell you...this is not always fun! But God seems to set things up so I have to live out the principles that I'm teaching before I stand up and talk with you. Unfortunately for her, this usually means that my wife, Pam, also has to live through these experiences.

So, a few months before I did a series called *"When Bad Things Happen to Good People,"* neither Pam nor I were very happy campers. The same thing has happened as we have been going through our current series through Philippians. It's as if God keeps looking down on us saying, *"Well, Steve and Pam, are you choosing joy?"*

The question I think God wants us to face is this: Do we really believe this stuff, or is it just hot air? It's one thing to admire the Apostle Paul's joy while he was chained to a Roman soldier, but it's a whole other story to have joy myself when life is stormy. At one point while back, Pam looked at me and said, *"Steve I don't like living out this stuff before you preach it—at all! Why don't you preach on something easy—like what God thinks about gardening?"*

This is the eighth week in our *"Choose Joy"* series and we still haven't talked about gardening! But we have learned some principles to help us find joy when life gets messy. Today we'll discover three more joy producing principles. In fact, today's passage may be the most helpful joy resource in the entire book of Philippians because our text offers antidotes for three of life's biggest joy robbers.

Do you know what joy robbers are? Joy robbers are things that suck the joy out of us. You get up one morning after a great night's sleep. You're ready for a fine day. But as you bounce into the kitchen to get your coffee you notice there's a huge puddle of water under the refrigerator. It quit working the night before so you have to buy a new one. That can be a joy robber.

Or, you're late to work so you go a faster than you should. Suddenly you see a flashing light behind you...and the officer just had a fight with his wife, so he doesn't give you a break this time. As you drive away with your \$100 citation, that can be a joy robber.

Or, once you arrive at work your boss informs you the company is suspending all overtime. You'd been using your overtime to help pay for the recent increase in your gas bill to get to and from work. No longer having the extra pay could be a real joy robber.

Joy robbers are the stuff of life. They're curve balls that make us want to stay in bed and curl up in a fetal position. They can turn smiles into frowns. They can kill the spring in our step and cause us to start popping Advil or drinking too much.

So, what can we do about them? There was a bumper sticker that used to say "*Life Happens.*" And it does. We can't stop the stuff of life from happening. Life happens. There's nothing we can do about that. Curveballs are going to keep coming until we get to heaven. Your life is not going to be perfect until then. Neither is mine.

So instead of talking about what God thinks about gardening, I'd like to explore How to overcome three of life's biggest joy robbers. Follow along in your message notes as we read together Philippians 4:2-9.

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. ⁹Whatever 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 4:2-9)

Notice that in verses 2&3 Paul tells two women in the church to get along with each other. From the text we learn that these women were not outsiders; they were active participants in the church. We also see that the issue dividing the women was not doctrinal. If it had been, Paul would have resolved it by siding with one or the other. Also, Paul knows both their names: Euodia and Syntyche. This suggests they were prominent in the church. Perhaps both women were present as Paul preached on the banks of the river in Philippi when Lydia first became a Christ-follower.

Paul urges them to "*agree with each other.*" This was important because their dispute was causing dissension in the rest of the congregation. It always does. When two people are at odds in a church, it doesn't just affect those two people. There's a ripple affect. Their disharmony also affects their friends and the friends of their friends.

That's why God takes seriously the issue of disharmony. We see this, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1:10. "*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you may agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and*

that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” Division undermines the spiritual synergy that God intends in the church. Disharmony introduces negativity that makes it difficult for the Holy Spirit to move among us. All this to say, division and disharmony are serious issues to God!

So much so, in verse 3 Paul urges someone to help the two women reconcile. There is some debate among Bible scholars whether or not Paul mentions the person’s name. But it is very clear that he is asking someone to help the two women work out their differences. Maintaining harmony is so important in the church that if we can’t work things out ourselves, then by all means, we should get a third party to help. This leads us to the first joy-robber we find in this passage.

1. Sour Relationships

Sour relationships can be a huge joy robber! When we get cross-wise with someone else it puts a damper on just about everything. I’m sure we’ve all experienced this. I know I have! Even at home! Now, I know this may surprise you, but awhile back Pam and I got our wires crossed. The hard part was I had to preach that weekend. In fact, I was preaching about joy. All weekend long I kept hearing God ask, “*Got joy, Steve?*” I felt like looking up and saying, “*As a matter of fact, God, no, I got no joy!*”

Sour relationships do that, don’t they? They rob our joy! So, what can we do about this? What’s the antidote for the joy robber called sour relationships?

Look back at verse 2. You might underline the phrase “*agree with each other.*” That’s the key. That’s the antidote to sour relationships. Literally this means “*to be of the same mind.*” This is a call to live in harmony with each other. We could also put it this way: Learn to get along with other people.

For some of us this is easier than others. My wife can get along with almost anyone—except for me when I’m being a knucklehead. But not everyone is like Pam. Some of us are like porcupines. The closer we get to people the more we poke and irritate them.

But regardless if this comes easily or not, it’s worth the work to try to get along with other people. And it’s worth it to resolve things if we’re at odds with someone. In my mind, I can imagine how it might have been in the church at Philippi. Everyone knew that Euodia and Syntyche were not speaking to each other. Their conflict made it uncomfortable for everyone in the church.

Maybe the two women sat in different places than normal in worship. Maybe they tried not to make eye contact when they were in the same room. Maybe as they talked with mutual friends, they would avoid bringing up each other’s name. Sometimes we think it’s easier to pretend there’s nothing wrong when we have an issue with someone. We bury our head and hope to wake up and find everything is better.

But that doesn’t happen in real life. Paul pleads with both women to deal with reality and “*agree with each other.*” This takes work. Getting along with others won’t be easy.

Ephesians 4:3 says “Make every effort to keep the unity in the bond of peace.” Making every effort to keep the unity includes going the second, third and fourth mile.

It means not just forgiving someone seven times, but seventy times seven times. God calls us to forgive *“each other just as in Christ God forgave you.”* The next time you think about refusing to forgive someone, take a long look in the mirror and think about how much God has forgiven you. Jesus makes a very sobering statement in Matthew 6:15. “But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

So, the first joy robber in our passage is sour relationships. And the antidote is this: get along with people. Usually this means extending lots of grace. Keep in mind that sometimes God brings difficult people into our lives to teach us. Left to ourselves, we’d like to get rid of these difficult people. We’d like to brush them aside or ignore them.

But God doesn’t let us do that. Everyone in God’s family matters, not just those we get along with easily. So, in Paul’s words in verse 2 *“agree with each other.”* Get along with people. Why? It will increase your joy!

2. Worry

A second major joy robber is worry. Have you ever laid awake at night worrying about something? I know I have! Joy and worry are like oil and water. They don’t mix. If I am worrying about something, it’s almost impossible to have joy. That’s what makes verses 4-6 so relevant.

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 every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Anytime a word is repeated in the Bible it should catch our attention. In verse 4 rejoice is repeated twice. Both times it’s a command form of the verb in the present tense. The present tense in Greek carries the idea of an ongoing activity. Our rejoicing is to be an ongoing part of our day-to-day lifestyle. Friends, this is a call to supernatural living! Typically, most of us are joyful when things are going well, but we don’t have much joy when things aren’t going well.

But in verse 4 God calls us to a lifestyle of joy that remains steady regardless of our circumstances. Remember Paul was writing this while he was chained to a Roman soldier! Apparently, his adverse circumstances didn’t put a damper on his joy. This raises a question. How was Paul able to do that? How could he sustain joy when his circumstances were so rotten?

I think a key is found in verse 5. I’d like you to underline in your message notes the phrase “the Lord is near.” This is a truth that anchors everything else in this paragraph. If God is near, we can rejoice no matter how hard things get. Knowing God is near—if we remember it—makes all the difference. Why? Because if God is by our side, then we’ve got nothing to worry about! He can handle every one of our concerns.

Several years ago I swam the Donner Lake open water race for the first time. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I was committed to finishing the 2.7 mile swim. Well, the first year I swam for about a half hour and then I picked up my head to look around. I was completely alone. I didn't see anyone anywhere. I'd been told there would be kayakers nearby in case I got in trouble, but there wasn't a kayaker within ½ mile.

It was my first open water race and I started to wig out. I thought about how fast I could disappear beneath the surface. It would be weeks before they found my body! I started to panic and almost quit the race. But just before I headed toward shore, I started praying. Then I put my head back down and didn't look back.

But the second year I swam the Donner race I did things differently. I recruited my own escorts. In fact, I had two kayaks one on either side. A friend named Karl Rodriguez was on my right and another friend, Leo Castro, was on my left. Their presence made all the difference! If anything went wrong, I knew they'd be able to fish me out. They were only a few feet away during the entire swim. Because I knew they were next to me, I didn't lift my head up once. I settled right down, got into a good swimming rhythm and kept it up for the whole race.

Now magnify that same idea by say...infinity! It's not Karl Rodriguez who's next to you, or Leo Castro. It's God who is near! The same God who promises his children "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) The same God who promises Christ-followers, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) This makes a huge difference especially in times of trouble.

We keep swimming—we keep hanging on—because we know that God is with us. *"The Lord is near,"* Paul says. Joy becomes possible, then, not because everything is peachy. Joy is possible because of the deep-down confidence that God is near. Thus, it can be well with our soul no matter what circumstance we face.

Awhile back, I remember watching on TV a press conference in a Milwaukee hospital. A man had been driving his van on the freeway with his family. A piece of metal fell off a truck in front of him and punctured their fuel tank. The van ignited almost instantly. The man and his wife escaped, along with two of their children. But they watched helplessly as their six other children perished in the flaming vehicle.

It was one of the most horrific traffic accidents in Milwaukee's history. But at the news conference a few days later, the dad spoke confidently about God's goodness. Over and over again he declared his complete trust in the love of God he had experienced through his faith in Jesus Christ.

How is that kind of triumphant attitude possible? Well, the grieving father remembered that the Lord was near. Worry, anxiety and fretting will rob our joy every time. The antidote is to remember that God is near. If we've accepted Christ, he's with us. He won't leave us. He's closer than a kayak right next to you! In fact, if you're his child, the

Bible says God holds you in the palm of his hand. Nothing will ever happen without first passing through his loving fingers.

Several years ago, a well-known pastor in Colombia was gunned down by drug dealers. He'd been a leader of a powerful movement of God against corruption and drugs. He knew his life was in danger because of what he stood for. But I saw an interview with him just before he was killed. He made a statement I've never forgotten. He said, *"I'm completely invincible until God wants to take me home."* He said, *"No one can touch me and nothing can ever happen to me unless God allows it."* So...rejoice in the Lord, my friend. Rejoice! Why? Because God is near!

Paul goes on to say, *"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."*

Don't be anxious about anything. Don't worry about anything. Instead, pray about everything and trust God. You might circle the words anything and everything in your message notes. Don't be anxious about anything but pray about everything. Why? Because God is near! It sounds so simple, but has profound implications for how much joy we experience!

3. Negativity

A third joy robber is negativity. I've mentioned this several times in this series. What we think about affects virtually everything about our life. Why? Because thoughts lead to words; words lead to actions; actions lead to habits; habits shape our character and character shapes our destiny. So, our destiny begins with our thought life. We see this in verses 8&9.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. (Philippians 4:8&9)

The challenge we face is that virtually everything around us is negative. Most of the news on TV and radio is negative. What we read in the newspapers is mostly negative. What we read online is mostly negative. Many of us spend our day at work and much of what people talk about is negative. The weather is too hot; then it's too cold. One thing after another! All of this wears us down and, before we know it, we're sounding negative like everyone else.

It reminds me of a boo-hoo-me song I used to sing when I was a kid. *"Nobody likes me, everybody hates me. I'm going to the garden to eat worms. Long, slim slimy ones, short fat juicy ones. I'm going to the garden to eat worms!"*

Once we start down the negativity road, we start looking at life as a glass half empty. Nothing is as good as it could be. We pick and snipe at people. We develop the spiritual gift of criticism. All of this robs our joy! Studies have shown time and time again that people with a positive attitude enjoy life more, they laugh more and they live longer.

For the past eight weeks, we've been repeating verse 8 out loud. I hope you've memorized it by now! This verse is the antidote to overcome negativity. *"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."* Let's repeat it together.

Bible teachers have often observed that the supreme example of each of these characteristics is Jesus. Jesus is true. Jesus is noble. Jesus is right. He's pure, he's lovely and he's admirable. Jesus is also excellent and praiseworthy. Thus, one way we can develop Philippians 4:8 thinking is to focus our thoughts on Jesus.

But this type of Jesus-focused thinking requires mental muscle. Left alone, our thoughts will not drift in a God-ward direction. Just the opposite! They'll drift downward into a cesspool of negativity. It takes both personal effort and God's grace to reverse this trend.

A few weeks ago, we considered Philippians 2:12. *"Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling..."* This is our part—the diligence we apply to refocus our thought-life in a godly direction. *"...for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."* This is God's part in the process of our transformation. This is the grace God gives to energize us to want to change. When we invest our part, God always comes through with his part. Our part includes the things we've seen in today's passage.

Conclusion

I encourage you to take all three steps to overcome life's biggest joy robbers.

1. Instead of drowning in sour relationships, learn to get along with people. This will require giving others a whole lot of grace—like the grace God has given you.
2. Stop worrying. Jesus says, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27) In other words, cut it out! Worry doesn't help you or anybody else. Remember that God is near. Don't be anxious about anything, but pray about everything.
3. Get rid of the negativity. Muscle your thoughts away from the negative and begin thinking more like God—be positive. *"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."*

Pray

