

## **“Gentleness Toward Others”**

### **Philippians 4:4-7**

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SERMON 1960

by Michael David Henson

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Our sermon text is from Philippians 4:5, “Let your gentleness be known to all men.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today’s Epistle from Philippians 4 begins with “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice.” This exhortation for the Christian to rejoice in all circumstances sounds a bit like my thanksgiving sermon, which taught that we are to be content in all circumstances and always giving thanks. In that sermon I also quoted St. Paul in Philippians 4. Verses 11-12 say, “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: <sup>12</sup>I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” Is there a connection between the exhortation to give thanks and today’s exhortation to rejoice? Absolutely, let me explain.

Thanksgiving is always directed toward God. Before there can be true thanksgiving, there needs to be faith in Jesus Christ. With the knowledge of the promise of the Gospel and the reception of the forgiveness of sins, the believer learns that God is good and that He is always giving out good gifts. This thanksgiving is a fruit of faith. St. Paul said that He had learned to be content and thankful. Thus, the thanksgiving sermon was a course in learning to be thankful. We say, “The eyes of all look to you, O Lord. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” Thus, the learned disciple of Christ is content and gives thanks in all circumstances.

Today’s lesson also requires faith before there can be rejoicing. Today’s sermon is a course in rejoicing. Rejoicing is directed toward our neighbor. Just as we maintain the distinction between faith and love, so we maintain the distinction between thanksgiving and rejoicing. We are to have faith toward God and love toward our neighbor. So also, we are to have thanksgiving toward God and rejoicing before our neighbor. You may have already guessed that rejoicing, too, is a fruit of faith. And, like thanksgiving, it is learned by the believer. Let us begin today’s sermon: a course in rejoicing.

**Before we can delve right in, we need to speak about justice.** Justice is about the administration of the law. Justice would include an assignment of merited rewards or punishments based on that law. There are certain rights which are accorded by a following of the law and there are certain punishments which are applied because of a breaking of the law.

It doesn’t take long in the discussion about justice, before someone brings up impartiality. The simplest illustration is the child who cries out, “It’s not fair!” We like the idea of strict justice so that there is no impartiality. However, the application is not so

pleasant, and it isn't long before we cry out for leniency and exceptions.

In the Scriptures we learn that God has delivered to us His law. It is not an easy law to keep, because His law judges not just outward actions, but even the motivation and intents of the heart. God doesn't just desire that we not hurt, harm or murder our neighbor. Our God desires that we fear and love Him so that we help and befriend him in every physical need.

It doesn't take long before we realize that God's laws set such a high mark that we cannot keep them perfectly. And according to strict justice, there is no partial credit. There are many people, who are ignorant of the Word of God. And thus, they say things like, "Well, as long as you try" or "Just do the best that you can." However, strict justice demands perfection. **And God's Law demands strict justice.**

Just listen to the Word describe God's strict justice:

Leviticus 19:2 says, "Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'" The bar is set as high as God's holiness.

Matthew 5:48 says, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." The Law demands perfection.

And James 2:10 explains God's strict justice, when it says, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." It is all or nothing. Break the law of God even once, and you are guilty.

Finally, Galatians 3:10 quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 which says, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." According to strict justice, God assigned the curse of hell to those who break the law.

When we return to Philippians, we find that **St. Paul is not maintaining strict justice when it comes to our relations with our fellow man.** He says, "Let your gentleness be known to all men." Instead of strict justice, St. Paul is telling us to soften the blow. St. Paul speaks of gentleness toward our neighbor. This rejoicing which we are to do before our neighbor, shows itself in our moderation toward them. It is shown in our gentleness and love.

Before other people, the Christian is to be gentle and willing to yield. This Christian attitude is quite a change from strict justice. It would be disastrous if we held our neighbor to the strict justice of the law. If our neighbor brought over some soup, we shouldn't criticize them that the temperature was lukewarm by the time it arrived. If someone helps you to rake your leaves, you shouldn't tell them that they didn't do a thorough job. If someone comes to church, you don't lay into them for being 10 minutes late. When someone gives you a gift, you don't belittle them for getting the wrong size!

This attitude is also seen as we deal with our fellow believer at church. If they nod off during the sermon, you don't call out their name to wake them up. Now according to strict justice, sleeping during the sermon is despising preaching and God's Word, but moderation leads us to be gentle. We do care if they are trying to stay awake or doing the best that they can. Did you have a rough night? Can I give you a mint or piece of gum? I'm glad you could hear the readings and sing the hymns!

**Maybe you know of the person, who has made themselves into a walking law for others.** Everything that they do or say ends up making you feel poorly. They

have made themselves the model and rule and they expect everyone to follow their standards. This attitude is not love and gentleness toward others.

Maybe you have noticed that they are strict only in certain areas. The gardener expects everyone else to have a pristine yard and all of the weeds picked. The crafty decorator expects everyone to have an immaculate house which is decorated according to the season. And the auto mechanic is appalled when someone doesn't keep their car regularly maintained, vacuumed and waxed. Is it needless for me to say that the mechanic's garden, and the gardener's car and the mechanic's household decorations are not all at the same standards? No one could possibly do everything that "they say" we are supposed to do.

When St. Paul says, "Let your gentleness be known to all men," he is teaching just exactly what we are required to show our neighbor—love and gentleness. Let me cite you some appropriate passages about how **we are not to hold our neighbor to strict justice, but to show them leniency and compassion.**

Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." And thus, if our neighbor falls short in some area, we are not to judge, but to help them out and do their part for them.

Ephesians 4:1-2 "... walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love...." Love involves your gentleness in adapting to them, not forcing them to adapt to you. Love and gentleness leads you to conform and fit yourself to your neighbor, rather than making everyone else conform and fit themselves for your benefit.

Colossians 3:12-13, "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." In love and gentleness, we overlook and even forgive many shortcomings and offenses.

Thus, you see that there is a difference between strict justice and moderate justice. Before God's law, we are held to strict justice. We even hold ourselves to God's strict justice. But we hold up to our neighbor a gentleness and compassion. We bend over backwards to be kind and help them.

**Before I go on, you already know that God's strict justice of the law is not His final word. Our heavenly Father has a message of Gospel which forgives all the transgressions of God's strict Law.** With the advent or coming of Jesus Christ, our God shows us a love which knows no bounds. He forgives our sins. He creates faith and gives us a new heart. He showers us with the Holy Spirit and the gift of sanctification. He makes us His child and continues to teach us. We are blessed.

**And thus, we rejoice.** We rejoice always, and again I say we rejoice. Despite our failures, our loving God is patient. He loves and befriends us, again and again. Maybe you thought I had forgotten that this sermon was course in rejoicing. I didn't. The Thanksgiving Day sermon showed that our thanksgiving is not tied to our having plenty or our being in need. We learned to be content in all circumstances and to give thanks always. Similarly, our rejoicing in God's goodness is often hampered by the actions of others, but it need not be. **Our rejoicing is not dependent upon the actions of others.** We are not called to change others, neither are we called to hold others to strict justice. We are to rejoice in our salvation and we show it by our

gentleness toward others. What a joy it is to know that **nothing is necessary for a Christian but faith (toward God) and love (toward neighbor)**. Even as we speak the truth, we are put the best construction on everything our neighbor does. We speak the truth, but not in a headstrong or unyielding way. As long as we are not forced to sin, we give in and cover over the sins, weakness and ignorance of others.

Now this leads me to **the final application** of our rejoicing while showing love and gentleness to all men. Yes, St. Paul said, "...to all men." Thus St. Matthew 5:44 says, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." **As a Christian you are to rejoice even while being treated poorly. If someone wrongs you or harms you, regard it as good and think the best of it.**

First, you are called to rejoice in God's love toward you, because it enables you to love your neighbor with gentleness—and that neighbor includes your enemy or anyone who hurts you. Their wrong action does not prevent you from being loving and gentle. And that is all you are required to do. We hope that they are turned from the sin, repent and receive the Lord's forgiveness, but that it the Lord's doing. You are only called to show gentleness to all men.

Second, their wrong action can do no harm to your faith. Should they take away your goods, your God will still find a way to give you your daily bread. Your God has more to give, than they can take away. Should they harm your body, they cannot harm your soul. And you will receive a resurrection of the body. Though others are mad and hateful, we can still be gentle. Though we cannot make our gentleness please everyone, we can still show love. The worst that they can say is that you were gentle.

St Paul explains that we ought to have rejoicing, because verse 8 says, "The Lord is near." **With God on our side, nothing can harm us.** You might ask if we should fear that the wicked will take advantage and harm us for our gentleness? If there was no God, then yes. But with a God who is near, we need not fear. He has much more than people can take from you. St. Paul says in 9, "Be anxious for nothing." **We need not worry about anything. He has us and all things in his hands**

To return to impartiality, Christian gentleness is to be perfect and whole, not unequal and partial. The gentleness which we, at times, show toward our family and friends, we are to also direct toward our enemy. **If someone wrongs you or harms you, regard it as good and rejoice that God is providing an opportunity to show gentleness to all men.** "Direct your life so that you do suffer and yield everything that can be done" with the only limit being that you yourself are not to disobey God's commandments. And as St. Paul says in verse 7 and I say at the end of every sermon, "...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

You need not concern yourself with your own possession or the reactions of those with whom you come in contact. What a joy it is to know that **nothing is necessary for a Christian but faith (toward God) and love (toward neighbor)**. Those who rejoice in God are satisfied that they have peace with God. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice." Romans 15:13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.