

Series: Fruit of the Spirit (Cultivate Peace)
Valley Community Baptist Church
Avon, CT

Text: Philippians 4:2-9
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Introduction

Mark Twain is given credit for the following observation:

He who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way. – Mark Twain

“He who carries a cat by the tail learns something he could learn in no other way.” What did Mark Twain mean? He meant that I could explain to you all day long what it’s like to carry a cat by the tail, and that will never be the same as trying it yourself. *There is something that you can only know through the practice itself. You learn something in the doing that can never be put into words. (James Smith)*

There are certain spiritual realities I will never learn by reading or listening to someone explain them. **There are spiritual understandings that come only in the doing.** There is learning in the doing that cannot be put into words. There is a spiritual understanding that only comes when I **actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit.**

In this series we are focused on cultivating the fruit of the Spirit. But **what exactly does it mean to cultivate?** It means to actively work to create suitable conditions for something to flourish more than it would otherwise. I can’t force a tomato plant to produce tomatoes. In fact, if I ignore the plant, it may die. But, by actively cultivating it (weeding, feeding, watering, tending), I help the plant flourish more than it would otherwise.

Today we are focusing on the characteristic of peace. **What is peace?** Biblically, peace is more than just the absence of conflict. The OT word for peace, *shalom*, describes the way things ought to be. Biblical peace has the idea of wholeness, well-being, and security – all of which are associated with God’s presence. So peace could be described as **the way things ought to be in my life, with people, and with God.** Galatians 5 tells us that peace is a characteristic of God that is produced in us by the Holy Spirit.

If peace is a characteristic of God produced by the Holy Spirit, then **what does it mean to cultivate peace?** To cultivate the characteristic of peace (which the Spirit ultimately produces) means **we act in ways that help peace flourish more than it would otherwise.** Anyone who gardens understands that cultivating takes tremendous effort. So while the Holy Spirit produces in us the characteristic of peace, we cultivate the garden of our lives so that peace flourishes more than it would otherwise. Thankfully, God explains in the book of Philippians how to cultivate His peace. **First, let’s see that...**

1. We cultivate peace by loving humbly.

Paul wrote in Philippians 4:2,

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Philippians 4:2

Based on Paul's pleading with Euodia and Syntyche, we understand that things are not the way they ought to be between these two women. There appears to be a distinct lack of peace in their relationship.

Notice that Paul pleaded with **both** women. "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche." He did not take sides, which leads me to conclude that the issue between them was not about the Gospel and it was not about theology. If the issue were Gospel-focused or theology-focused, Paul would have taken a clear side. This problem was a personal, social, political, or local issue. Today, the problem might be Republican/Democrat, Conservative/Progressive, Mask/Not Mask. But the issue is not Gospel or theology.

Notice too, that Paul **named** each woman in a letter sent to the entire Philippian church. Doing this was very unusual in Paul's culture. It leads me to conclude that by the time Paul wrote, the conflict had spilled over into the church and was threatening the peace of the church body. Others were being impacted by their conflict.

Paul's solution was for the women to "*agree in the Lord.*" The word "agree" is the Greek word **φρονέω**. It means "be of the **same** mind, have the **same** attitude, have the **same** opinion, and have the **same** goal." What is the "same attitude" that Paul wanted for these women? Earlier in the book, in Philippians 2:1-8, Paul had already described the attitude he connected to the word **φρονέω**.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the **same mind**, having the same love, being in full accord and of **one mind**. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have **this mind** among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:1-8

In these eight verses Paul explained that the foundation of unity and peace is the "**same attitude**" of loving humility which Jesus lived out. Loving humility unites because:

- It acts out of love – v. 1
- It acts from selflessness – v. 3
- It humbly considers others more significant – v. 3
- It looks out for the other person's interests - v. 4
- It does not grasp for what is rightly ours – v. 6
- It serves others – v. 7
- It humbly obeys the Father – v. 8

By calling Euodia and Syntyche to have "the same mind," Paul invited the two women to reach peace with each other in the same way that God through Jesus reaches peace with us. Pastor Colin Smith explains this:

God makes peace, not through a triumph of power, but through a triumph of love. He wins us. He woos us. He draws us. His love constrains us. **That is how God makes peace.** And then think about this: **He did this when right was all on his side and wrong was all on ours!** (Pastor Colin Smith)

I don't know about you, but I find that when I am at odds with someone, it has often begun when I feel that I have a **right**, or when I feel I *am right*. My inward thoughts go something like this ... "You can't take that from me, that's **rightly** mine!" "You can't tell me what to do, I have the **right** to do what I want." "I really don't have to be humble about this issue because ... I am **right** and you're wrong." I think that the key point of Paul's invitation to love humbly in Philippians 2 lands squarely in verses 5-6.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be **grasped** ... Philippians 2:5-6

Jesus' equality with God the Father was **rightly** his. Jesus was **right** when he told people that he was equal with the Father. **Right** was *all on his side*. But even when right was *all on his side*, Jesus did not grasp what was rightly his, but instead, he **humbly loved** us by letting go of what was rightly his. Think about this: if anything has ever existed that was worth "being grasped" onto, would it not have been Jesus's uniquely intimate, equal, beautiful, and glorious relationship with the Father? It was by letting go of the very thing that Jesus could rightly grasp, that He loved us the most.

Paul said to Euodia and Syntyche, and he now says to us, **stop your grasping!** Instead of grasping, let go of your rights! Let go of your need to be "right." Instead of grasping, **humbly love that person** by serving her, by serving him. We cultivate peace when we stop grasping and love humbly. **Next, we see that...**

2. We cultivate peace by praying thankfully.

As we move back to Philippians 4:6 and 7, we see that Paul gave two commands, one negative and one positive, and then he gave a resulting promise that is true when both commands are followed. The two commands are "**reject anxiety**" and "**pray thankfully**," and the promise is that **God's peace will guard** your heart and mind. Let's read verses 6-7 together.

... **do not be anxious** about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving **let your requests be made known to God**. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:6-7

The first command is to reject anxiety. The negative command is "Do not be anxious." Paul meant that the Philippians were to stop doing something they were **habitually doing**. "Stop doing what you have been consistently doing." They were to make a persistent **effort** to stop being anxious. Paul's command is **all-inclusive**: Stop being anxious about ANYTHING. He

did not say they should not care about anything or be careless. But that they should not be **filled with anxiety** “about ANYTHING.” Which leads me to a question: **What is anxiety, and what is it to be filled with anxiety?** Arthur Roche explains it this way:

Anxiety is a thin stream of fear trickling through the mind. If encouraged, it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. (Arthur Roche)

As someone who personally struggles with anxiety, I think Arthur Roche is spot on. Anxiety is a form of **fear**. And that fear works like a river cutting a channel through the ground. Soon, there are an increasing number of thought-tributaries spilling into that stream. Only that stream is not running along the ground, it’s running through my mind.

The fear that anxiety represents is a fear that God is not actively present nor actively working in my life. The channel that anxiety has cut in my mind is directing my thoughts toward fear, and away from trusting him. Jesus speaks about this in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:30, he talks to those who are concerned that God does not care about their everyday needs. He addresses them as “O you of little faith.” Jesus invites us to reject anxiety and replace it with faith and trust.

The second command is to pray thankfully. This positive command is also all-inclusive, and it is the complete opposite of the negative command. Paul says... “but in EVERYTHING ... with thanksgiving... let your requests be made known to God.” The answer to anxiety is thankful prayer. To pray thankfully shows that we are approaching God in a spirit of humble faith and dependence. **Thanking God as I give him the request declares that my peace doesn’t depend on getting my requests.** Praying thankfully declares that I am **trusting God** no matter what He provides. Praying thankfully is a statement of **faith** that I trust that whatever God sends in response to my prayer will be for his glory and my ultimate good.

The promised result of rejecting anxiety and praying thankfully is that “God’s peace” guards us. The peace of God is “the peace which God himself enjoys.” (O’Brien) The peace of God is the peace that God has in himself. God is not anxious. He possesses perfect *shalom*, perfect peace. Peace is part of God’s very nature, part of His very character.

The peace God possesses is not a peace we are able to comprehend fully. It surpasses our thinking and our planning to create peace like it. On top of that, the peace which God possesses works like a Roman military guard to protect our hearts and minds – that is, our emotions, thoughts, and our choices.

How does praying thankfully cultivate peace? Praying thankfully cultivates peace because it declares that I **will trust** God no matter what happens. Praying thankfully declares my **belief and trust** in God’s character. When I rest in God’s character and declare my trust in him, he grants me his own peace, which increases that quality in my life. John Walvoord put it this way:

[The peace of God] is a peace that comes from dependence upon a God who knows the end from the beginning, who does all things well, and will not permit in the life of His children anything that will not work out for eternal good. (John Walvoord)

There are some things that are difficult here and now. But we can rest in a God who is working out all things for eternal good. Once we begin to cultivate peace by praying thankfully, Paul **next shows us that...**

3. We cultivate peace by thinking intentionally.

In this next section of Philippians 4 Paul appealed to the believers to embrace **intentional thoughts** and **actions** that result in God's peaceful presence. Verses 8 and 9 read,

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, **think** about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—**practice** these things, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:8-9*

Paul made two related appeals in verses 8 and 9: **think about these things** and **practice these things**. Paul called believers to meditate on a list of truths. Then, in the same way that Paul had practiced those truths, believers are to practice them.

The word that Paul used for "think" means to *deliberately keep your mind on*, or to *purposely fix your thoughts on*. We might say it this way, **intentionally think** about these things. So what are the "things" on which we are to **think intentionally**?

To think on "whatever is TRUE" means to think about what God declares is factually correct. We can ask ourselves, "What has God revealed in His Word that is true? Is this thought correct according to God? Is it correct based on what I know of God? Is it correct according to His Word? Is it correct according to the way God works?" We are to intentionally think on whatever is **true**.

To think on "whatever is HONORABLE" means to think about what is worthy of respect. We should ask ourselves, "Does this thought show respect and honor? Does it show respect toward God? Or does it dishonor him? Does it show respect for another person? Or does it disrespect them?" We are to think intentionally on whatever is **honorable**.

To think on "whatever is JUST" means to think about what is right, or to meditate on what it means to "do the right thing." Based on how Christ has loved us, some questions to ask might be... "Is this a right way to think about this situation? Is this the right way to respond to this person?" We are to intentionally think on whatever is **right**.

To think on "whatever is PURE" means to think about what is morally blameless or holy. We can ask ourselves, "If someone else knew what I was thinking right now, would I be ashamed? Does this thought measure up to God's concept of blamelessness? Do the things I read and watch foster pure thoughts, or do they make pure thoughts more difficult?" We are to think intentionally on whatever is **pure**.

To think on "whatever is LOVELY" means to think about what "calls or draws out love," what inspires love. We can ask these questions: "Is this thought something that would draw others to the love of Christ? In light of love, is this thought beautiful or ugly?" We are to think intentionally on whatever is lovely and calls out love from others.

To think on "whatever is COMMENDABLE" means to think on what is praiseworthy and admirable. We can ask ourselves, "If someone knew what I was thinking, would it cause them to want to praise and worship God? Does this thought lead me to want to praise and worship God?" We are to think intentionally on whatever is praiseworthy.

In addition to these six truths, Paul said, if there is anything else that is excellent, if there is anything else that is praiseworthy, **think** and practice all these things as well.

Paul is affirming that, as believers, **our minds matter**. In fact, our minds and our thinking are so crucial in our abiding walk with Christ that in another passage Paul affirms that we must

... take every thought captive to obey Christ ... 2 Corinthians 10:5

Taking thoughts captive involves intentionally thinking and practicing the truths Paul listed. When we practice these things, “the God of peace” will be with us. There is a sense, as believers having received his Spirit, that God is always with us. But Paul is saying that when we capture thoughts, when we think about and do these things, we experience God's presence and peace in a way that we would not otherwise. We are abiding with Christ and doing the work that cultivates peace.

Because the Holy Spirit ultimately produces spiritual fruit, we may have the mistaken impression that we have a passive role. But we cannot be passive and “walk by” by the Spirit. Encouraging the *Fruit of the Spirit* to flourish requires personal action.

I began this message with Mark Twain’s observation that **“He who carries a cat by the tail learns something he could learn in no other way.”** There is a spiritual understanding that only comes when I **actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit**. I come to experience peace in a way that deeply changes how I live. Let’s love humbly, pray thankfully, and think intentionally. **Grab the cat by the tail!**

Let’s pray.