



JUNE 17, 2018

WHEN WE CHOOSE GENTLENESS, CHRIST COMES NEAR

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PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9NRSV

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

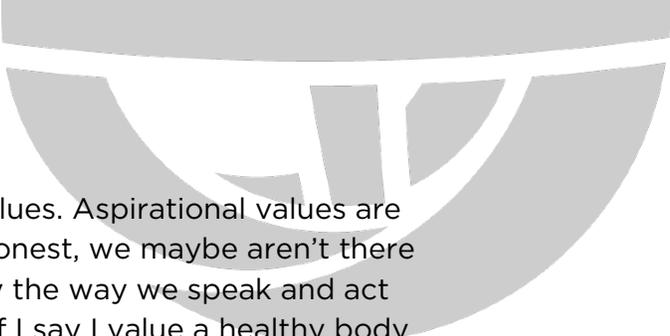
⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

When my kids were growing up, we had three simple rules for communication. Before they opened their mouths – especially in the heat of an argument – they were supposed to ask themselves:

- 1) Is what I'm about to say *true*?
- 2) Is it *necessary*?
- 3) Is it *kind*?

I'd like to say those rules always led to peace and harmony in our house, but that would definitely not be true. And I'd like to say that as the mom I consistently set a good example. But that would not be the case either. Still, I think striving following these standards is a good thing. Because healthy, positive relationships start with healthy, positive communication. We can't have a strong family unless we're actually doing what it takes to cultivate one.

That connection may seem obvious, but for most of us there's a gulf between where we are and where we think we are. You might hear it expressed as the



difference between actual values and aspirational values. Aspirational values are those qualities we believe to be true ... but if we're honest, we maybe aren't there yet. Actual values are what's reflected by reality - by the way we speak and act and spend our time and our money. So you tell me: If I say I value a healthy body but I don't exercise, never visit the doctor, and polish off a pint of Ben and Jerry's when I get home from a stressful day at work: aspirational or actual?

This concept is just as true for organizations as it is for individuals. Another example: How many of you have ever visited a church that had some sort of sign or banner that said 'all are welcome.' Except when you went into worship, not one person actually talked to you. It happens. And I'd bet the people of those churches would describe themselves as friendly, and no doubt they are ... with each other. Aspirational or actual?

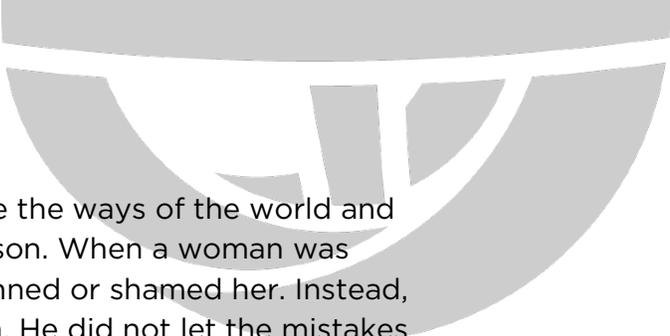
So do you see Paul's message in Philippians 4 as aspirational, or actual? After all, Paul is lifting up values and behaviors that most believers claim as the core of their faith. *Rejoice in the Lord always. Be gentle. Do not worry. Pray about everything.* Do these things, Paul says, and share in Christ's peace.

But is it so easy? It isn't always for me. For instance, after this past week, I've found it pretty hard to rejoice in the Lord. I am deeply disturbed by the reports of minor children being separated from their parents and housed in detention facilities on the southern border. I am distressed to hear scripture misinterpreted to justify actions that don't reflect the Bible's repeated call to treat foreigners and aliens with mercy and dignity. I don't see much progress in the way our elected officials are speaking about or to one another. In so many ways, these are anxious times, angry times. I can't rejoice in the Lord when the world seems so off kilter.

But remember: that was the case for Paul too. He was in prison. The congregations he cared about were struggling. Life in the Roman Empire didn't look that different from life today: Dictators oppressed their people. War ravaged the innocent. People betrayed one another and pushed each other down in order to get ahead.

Yet here is Paul, urging the Philippians to fight despair and cling to hope. It's as if he is saying, 'yes, you can.' Yes, you can find joy amidst the stress. Yes, you can find peace amidst the chaos. Tucked into the center of this familiar passage is a key verse that reminds us of why this is possible: *The Lord is near.* Maybe Paul is talking about his steadfast belief that Christ would return soon. Or maybe he's talking about the promise of Matthew 18, that where two or three are gathered, Christ is present. Either way, for Paul, the promise that Christ was with him - now and always - was enough for him to rise above the false, dishonorable, impure, unjust, and shameful. It was enough for him to actually live out his faith in a real, meaningful way.





Time and again, this is what Jesus did. He rose above the ways of the world and embodied love by always, always, caring for the person. When a woman was caught in the act of adultery, Jesus should have shunned or shamed her. Instead, he gave her a second chance and affirmed her worth. He did not let the mistakes of her past set the course of her future. Jesus chose gentleness.

When the lepers – the most unclean in a culture that prized purity and wholeness as a sign of holiness – called out to Jesus for healing, he should have kept his distance. Instead, he treated them with dignity. He listened to them. He reached out to them. He did not compound their suffering by acting as though they were less than human. Jesus chose gentleness.

And when children, who had no place in public society, clamored around him, he should have dismissed them. Instead, he welcomed them into his arms. He did not ignore them or send them away. Jesus chose gentleness.

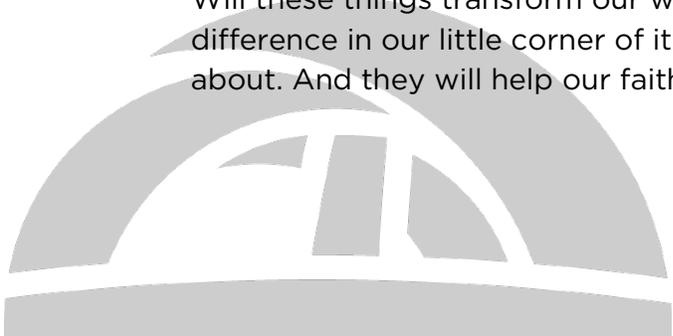
Friends, when we choose gentleness, Christ comes near. It happens when we *show compassion. Have empathy. Be kind. Take other's feelings into consideration. First, do no harm.*

If you're going to let this aspirational value of gentleness in Christ become actual, it has to start from within. There's a reason Paul lifted up that list of Greek virtues – calling them to think on whatever is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent. We can too easily focus on what is wrong – wrong with the world, and wrong with us. We can become numb to the stories we see, or succumb to despair that things will never get better. This is not what God intended. No.

I love the way actress Viola Davis puts it: “They tell you to develop a thick skin so things don't get to you. But what they don't tell you is that your thick skin will keep everything from getting out, too. Love, intimacy, vulnerability. I don't want that. Thick skin doesn't work for me anymore. I want to be transparent, translucent.” For that to work, Davis said, she had to learn to be light – the kind of light that fills up the darkness instead of flickers feebly under a bushel basket. It started with choosing gentleness for herself. That softened her hard edges. It gave her the courage to face reality but not be defeated by it.

Want to really live into Philippians 4? Start by choosing gentleness. That means giving others the benefit of the doubt. It means letting things go – hurts and slights and disappointments. It means being gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Will these things transform our world? Maybe not all at once. But they will make a difference in our little corner of it. They can matter deeply to the people we care about. And they will help our faith blossom. Because every time we do we are



reminded that we can. We can because the Lord is near. We can because Christ shows us the way. And when we do our aspirational values become a little more real. Amen.

