

Philippians 4:1-9: **Whatever is True**

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Listen with me for God's word to us from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, chapter 4 (CEB):

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Loved ones, ² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life.

⁴ Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

⁸ From now on, [siblings], if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹ Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

When I was a child, our church put a big emphasis on everyone memorizing scripture. Our Sunday School offered various challenges and prizes for all of us who worked up to reciting sections of the Bible from memory. My parents really got into this too, especially my dad, who valued both Bible study and intellectual exercise.

My parents also felt strongly about us all eating breakfast together before school or work. So imagine me as a tween at breakfast, desperate for two more hours of sleep, and instead having to join the rest of the family in learning and reciting Bible verses together. Oh joy. During those mornings I could have won an Olympic medal in grumbling. (Sorry, Mom.)

Yet some early family patterns keep resonating in our lives. To this day I love breakfast with family. And above all the other scripture verses we memorized, I most remember Philippians 4:8 in the version we learned:

Finally, [siblings], 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. (NIV)¹

The apostle Paul sent those words to a group of Jesus-followers in the town of Philippi, at the top of the Aegean Sea. Paul wrote to them from prison hundreds of miles away, and still this letter is shot through with joy as Paul addresses siblings in faith whom he loves and misses. Paul's faith in Jesus as Lord lets him see adversity from another angle, as a story in which God is with us and for us even during something as awful as imprisonment. Paul yearns to be where he cannot, but Christ's love radiates through this letter.

¹ NIV (1978) has "brothers" as the second word. TNIV (2005) uses the more inclusive "brothers and sisters."

By the time he memorized Philippians 4:8, my father also lived in a prison of sorts: a body weakened by heart disease. And that caused him some long, difficult days of frustration or depression. But as I look back, this verse from Philippians became a guiding star in Dad's life.

During Vietnam and Watergate and the civil rights movement and the women's movement and the computer revolution, Dad sifted everything in search of what is *true*. He wrestled with complex questions of ethics as he sought to choose what is *right*. As a professor of music and lover of ideas, what is *lovely* enraptured my dad. Sometimes he'd get so excited about a bass melody in Brahms, or the taste of farm stand vegetables, that we kids could be embarrassed by his enthusiasm.

This author, Paul, wrote many of the letters that make up the New Testament. Amid all his faithful impulses and his arguments and his blind spots and his human complexities, one overarching theme all through Paul's letters is community. He writes to *groups* of believers in various towns. Whether Paul yearns to rekindle their faithfulness, or to address disputes, or to encourage them to persevere, he knows that Jesus calls people *together* — to be together with God and together with the community.

Togetherness is a lifegiving gift from God. It's also incredibly hard because people do not see eye to eye.

Loved ones, [Paul says to the Philippians,] ² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life.

Paul doesn't berate Euodia and Syntyche for disagreeing. But he begs them to be forbearing with each other, to find common ground. And he begs the community around them to nurture them so that instead of a spreading corrosiveness, there will grow instead a spirit of constant rejoicing in the Lord.

If anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.

You may be aware that elections are coming up in a few weeks. Not all the rhetoric we hear lifts up what's excellent or praiseworthy. Not all of what we feel and speak builds up community or nurtures the public good. At least speaking for myself, I've got plenty of grumbling to offer these days.

And yet we hear from scripture: Even during days of crisis, focus your thoughts on all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just. In short, have in you the mind of Christ, as Paul says earlier in Philippians.

Just discerning what is true can take more work than we first think. It's one thing to identify conspiracy theories and dangerous delusions — we absolutely have to be attentive to those in our public discourse.

But there are deeper, thornier questions about what is true. Some of the received knowledge we absorb through our culture might not be as true as we think. And since white people created a lot of the ideas and institutions that the USA is built on, we who are white are especially challenged to uncover our own lies and self-deceits that have undergirded white supremacy for hundreds of years. Here are three brief examples of current Americans seeking whatever is true.

Joel Goza is a white guy with an background in theology and public leadership and social justice activism. His book *America's Unholy Ghosts* looks at how racial injustice was embedded in the ideas of thinkers who shaped this nation. This, I believe, is the kind of public truth-telling we Christians are called to. As we get ready to vote this season, can we identify truths we've bought into without actually examining them? And as we read the Bible, are we willing to let God shape us into more truthful people?

All that is true, all that is holy, all that is just. How does focusing our minds on those values change how we understand our history? And specifically our church history. Columbia Seminary professor William Yoo has written a powerful history of enslavement and anti-Black racism within the Presbyterian Church. His book is called *What Kind of Christianity*. Here's one such truth we need to confess and confront:

After 1830, white slave-owning Presbyterians and other proponents of slavery responded to the growth of the abolitionist movement with a ferocious flurry of literature in periodicals, pamphlets, and books to justify Black enslavement. One historian estimates that white clergy produced "almost half of all defenses of slavery published in America," and Presbyterian pastors were responsible for more proslavery writings than clergy from any other Christian tradition.²

I wish to God that my forebears in Presbyterian pulpits always had preached liberation for the enslaved, binding up for the brokenhearted. But the truth is that many Presbyterians for generations publicly promoted unholy injustice. So what can we current Presbyterians do to make repair, to rebuild trust? That's our work.

Another follower of Jesus who contemplates the history of this country is Marilynne Robinson, who happens to be one of our most astute novelists. During the last presidential election cycle she published an article encouraging residents of this land to consider each other as family — a messy, broken family to be sure. But family as opposed to strangers whom we disparage and ignore and repress. Her challenge echoes the call in Philippians to cultivate a Christlike mind. Marilynne Robinson writes:

If we learn anything from this sad passage in our history it should be that rage and contempt are a sort of neutron bomb in the marketplace of ideas.... This country would do itself a world of good by restoring a sense of the dignity, even the beauty, of individual ethicalism, of self-restraint, of courtesy. These things might help us to like one another, even trust one another, both necessary to a functioning democracy.³

Our country — and really, our world, as you well know this week — desperately needs people who cultivate these virtues. People whose forbearance and lack of anxiety and commitment to justice and sheer joy could transform public life. Could we be some of those people?

Last night at the Louisville Orchestra a Nigerian-American composer told us that a piece she wrote following 9/11 turned out to be jubilant, defiant, and resilient.⁴ It sounded to me like that musician

² Yoo, William. *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2022. p. 158.

³ "Don't Give Up on America." New York Times. 9 October 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/09/opinion/sunday/america-patriotism.html>

⁴ Nkieru Okoye, once of three Creators Corps composers in residence with the Louisville Orchestra this season. Her piece we heard on 14 October is called *Voices Shouting Out*.

was riffing on Philippians 4:8: Whatever makes you jubilant of heart, defiant against evil, resilient in spirit — cultivate such things. I think my dad would have been delighted.

What makes that kind of Christlike orientation even possible? The transformational presence of God. Right before and right after Philippians 4:8, Paul tells us: “The peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.” And “The God of peace will be with you.”

In the name of God the Holy,
Jesus Christ the True,
and the Holy Spirit of Peace.