

How Should the Christian Live These Days?

Acts 16:16-24; Phil 4:1-9 (text: v.4-7)

5 January 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It was the year 1973.

I had just left high school.

So, I was eighteen going on nineteen and was doing my military conscription in the South African Army.

I was a young adventurer. So, there were many things that I liked about the army.

However, with one all-too-common thing I was not at peace – i.e. the language of by far the majority of officers and fellow troops!

You see, the coarse language, which like machine-gunfire rolled off their lips, revealed hearts & minds that had little reverence for my Lord.

And so, from the first day that I entered the army, I vowed to God that, for His honour/glory, I would not let a single swear word or blasphemous utterance come out of my mouth! And, by God's grace, that's how I lived through that whole conscription year! But it was a major struggle!

You ask why?

Well, imagine if the only language you hear day-in and day-out, is so peppered with filth that the F-word is not just thrown in between *words*, but even in the *middle* of words, i.e. in-between *syllables* – and that's only the F-word; not to mention the other swear words and the abuse of our Lord's Names which bombarded my hearing and flooded my brain's random-access memory (RAM)!

The only way by which I can illustrate this brain-flooding is by my experiences with choir practice. You see, in the weeks before a great choir performance, those choir songs & words, which you have so often rehearsed, are so much in the forefront of your mind that, even when you wake up in the night to go to the bathroom, you find that the melodies & words of those songs are right there with you!

Well, the exact same thing happened with all the swear words that entered my hearing every day! Even when I was alone and, in my mind, rehearsing a sentence which I needed to go say to an officer or to the military barber, those swear words were like fizz in a shaken soft-drink bottle – they kept on pressing to exit my mouth!

So, I had a great battle to stick to my vow! It was tough, but, by God's grace, I did it!

Yes, despite all those awful words every day filling up again & again my random-access memory, not a single one of them ever left my lips!

But you know what?

So hard was my pious struggle that, on most days, my face must have looked like that of a Pharisee – sour, cold, embittered, better-than-thou; so much so that, one day, about four months into training, a fellow troop asked me, "Pieter, do you *enjoy* being a Christian?" His question could just as well have been, "Pieter, are you doing Christ and the Gospel a favour with your sour face?"

My brother & sister, why have I shared this experience with you?

Well, to show you how I was a Christian under *pressure* – but a Christian *with a sour face*!

That's exactly the opposite to the message of our text!

You see, in our text, the Apostle Paul exhorts the Christians of Philippi. And let's face it: they were suffering way more severely than I did in the army! Yet, Paul exhorts them to rejoice!¹

Well, here is the point of our Bible text of this morning: "How shall the Christian live?" And the three points of our sermon form the answer to this question:

- Rejoicing
- Slow to Retaliate
- Not Anxious!

Rejoicing

The Church in Philippi could not have had an easy life!

After all, they were the first generation of Christians in Philippi! In fact, at the time of our text, this congregation was only about ten years old!²

So, as people of the new Christian faith, they would have been hated by Jews and pagans. I mean, it was only about ten years earlier in this same Philippi that Paul & Silas got dragged before the magistrate when the owners of a slave girl – a fortune-teller – lost big business when Paul drove an evil spirit out of her! Then, Paul & Silas got attacked by the crowd. The magistrate of Philippi also tore off Paul & Silas' shirts and beat them with rods, then threw them in jail and fastened their feet in the stocks!

Such was the environment in which the Philippian Christians were living – one in which they could easily be mocked, ostracised and suffer unemployment and persecution.

And what does suffering & hardship normally do to you (a person)?

It dampens your joy!

But how does Paul exhort the Philippian Christians?

Well, he repeatedly commands them to *always rejoice!*³

See?

Gone is *sour-face piety!*

It simply does not belong to the life of the Christ-follower!

You say, "Joy amidst suffering?" "How is that possible?"

Well, have you noticed...?

Verse 4 does not just say, "Rejoice always!" No, it says, "***Rejoice in the Lord always!***"

What does that mean?

Well, that all our joy must be founded in God Triune! And all our thoughts of Father, Son & Holy Spirit will be delightful thoughts!

¹ Yes, Paul also tells them to live in unity. On this point, cf. 4:2-3, "***I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.***" ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life."

Also cf. 2:1-2, "***Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,*** ² ***then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.***"

² Yes, at the time when Paul was writing this letter to the Philippians, it was about 61 AD and Paul was in prison in Rome. And it was on Paul's second missionary journey (49-52 AD) that the church in Philippi began (with Lydia's conversion [cf. Acts 16:6-15]).

³ Cf. Phil 4:4 "***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.***"

Paul has already said the same in Phil 3:1, "***Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.***"

Look, is this not what David says in Ps 37:4, “*Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart*”?⁴

And look what Ps 94:19 says: “*When anxiety was great within me, your consolation (your comforts)⁵ brought joy to my soul.*”⁶

So, what do we see?

Well, that always (in all circumstances) – even when we suffer *for* our Lord, or even when we are disciplined *by* Him – we must never think worse of Him.

As Matthew Henry says so well, “*There is enough in God to furnish us with matter of joy in the worst circumstance on earth.*”⁷

My brother & sister, *joy in the Lord our God is a duty of great consequence in the Christian life; and Christians need to be again and again called to it!*⁸

Look, that was the spirit of the Apostle Paul himself!

I mean, what were his circumstances when he was writing the very words of our text?

Well, he was sitting in prison in Rome!

Nevertheless, his heart was filled with joy in the Lord!

Imagine what powerful message such a heart & life were sending out to Paul’s adversaries – and to the prison guard – in Rome!

How are you & I doing in this regard?

I mean, what message is your/my face giving to onlookers – especially to those who are not (yet) in Christ?

We do not know what the Lord will allow for us in 2020. Will it be a smooth road filled with joy, good income and success? Then, let’s not forget our Lord! I mean, our text says, “*Rejoice in the Lord always – i.e. also when we have plenty!*”

Will our 2020 road be rocky? Will we face hardship, perhaps even rejection or mocking or ostracism?

I pray that, even then, your & my joy in the Lord will show!

Perhaps you are now wondering: “But how will my rejoicing in the Lord be expressed in my daily life?”

Well, that brings us to point 2....

Slow to Retaliate

Verse 5 says, “*Let your gentle spirit be known to all men...*” (NASB).

The NIV says, “*Let your gentleness be evident to all.*”⁹

The ESV says, “*Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.*”

What exactly did Paul (through the Holy Spirit) have in mind?

- Gentle spirit?

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ps 37:4). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles. In

Hebrew: :וְהִתְעַנְגַּ עַל־יְהוָה וַיִּתְּן־לִי מִשְׁאֵלֹת לֶבָדִּי

⁵ So the KJV and NKJV of *tanhûmêkhā* (תַּחֲמוּמֵיךָ).

⁶ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ps 94:19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ Henry, M. (1994). [Matthew Henry’s commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume](#) (pp. 2327–2328). Peabody: Hendrickson.

⁸ My adaptation of Henry (ibid).

⁹ The Greek word is *epieikēs* (ἐπιεικής) a Substantivised Adjective, Neuter, Nominative, Singular of *epieikēs* (ἐπιεικής), “not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom, yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 371). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

- Gentleness?
- Reasonableness?

Yes, what does this mean in practical terms?

Well, here's an ancient Jewish story from about 100 BC,¹⁰ a story which illustrates the meaning of this word.¹¹ It's the story of evil people who hated a God-fearing man. So, they decided to make life hard for him to test his *gentleness* and *forbearance*. In other words, by pestering this godly man, these evildoers wanted to test the sincerity of this man's faith; to see how *slow-to-anger* this godly man was. It would make their day if he was *quick to retaliate*! Thankfully, their evil plans were thwarted – came to nothing! So, why did I tell this story?

Well, because in this story the same Greek word as the one of our text appears – i.e. the word for *gentleness*. What's more, this story also describes gentleness as *forbearance*! Thus, when Paul is saying, "Let your *gentleness* be known to all men..."¹² he means: "Let your *forbearance* – indeed, your *slow-to-anger spirit* – be known to all people!" Some commentators have also suggested words like, "your non-retaliation"¹³ or "not being touchy,"¹⁴ or "your avoidance of bigotry"¹⁵ or "your big-heartedness."¹⁶

¹⁰ It's from the apocryphal book called, *Wisdom of Solomon*.

"The Wisdom of Solomon or Book of Wisdom is a Jewish work, written in Greek, and most likely composed in Alexandria, Egypt. Generally dated to the mid first century BC, the central theme of the work is "Wisdom" itself, appearing under two principal aspects. In its relation to man, Wisdom is the perfection of knowledge of the righteous as a gift from God showing itself in action. In direct relation to God, Wisdom is with God from all eternity. It is one of the seven Sapiential or wisdom books included within the Septuagint, along with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Song of Solomon), Job, and Sirach, and is included in the canon of Deuterocanonical books by the Roman Catholic Church and the anagignoskomena (Gr. ἀναγινωσκόμενα, meaning "those which are to be read") of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Most Protestants consider it part of the Apocrypha" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Wisdom).

¹¹ Cf. the apocryphal book, Wisdom of Solomon 2:12-19 "Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law, and accuses us of sins against our training. ¹³He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord. ¹⁴He became to us a reproof of our thoughts; ¹⁵ the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others, and his ways are strange. ¹⁶We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean; he calls the last end of the righteous happy, and boasts that God is his father. ¹⁷Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; ¹⁸for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. ¹⁹Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance" (NRSV – emphasis mine). In the Greek text of this passage, the word for "gentle" (explained by its synonym "forbearance") is *epieikeia* (ἐπιεικεία), i.e. from the same word-root as *epieikés* (ἐπιεικές) in Phil 4:5.

¹² [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Php 4:5). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹³ Thielman, F. (1995). [Philippians](#) (pp. 215–232). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁴ Thielman (ibid), "It is easy in such circumstances to punch back—if not literally, at least verbally and in demeanor. Whether fairly or not, Christians sometimes have the reputation of being irascible and touchy, of stalking from home to work to voting booth with a scowl on their faces. But Paul's advice is for Christians in these circumstances to rejoice in the Lord and to make gentleness an obvious characteristic of their lives" (Emphasis mine).

¹⁵ Henry, M. (1994). [Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume](#) (pp. 2327–2328). Peabody: Hendrickson.

¹⁶ Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of Philippians (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.193).

Well, look what two other New Testament verses do! They lift your/my vision to our Lord Jesus Christ! The first one is 2 Cor 10:1 in which the Apostle Paul points to the ***meekness and gentleness (forbearance; non-retaliatory spirit)***¹⁷ of Christ!

And the second verse is 1 Pt 2:23 where Peter then describes for us our Lord Jesus' non-retaliatory spirit, saying...

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate;¹⁸ when he suffered, he made no threats.¹⁹ Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.²⁰

My brother & sister, how is your/my forbearance when we are mocked/ostracised for our faith?

Are we following our Lord's example?

Are we slow to anger – slow to retaliate? Or are we touchy – standing on our right; insisting on our just due?

Remember, our text speaks to Christians who are suffering hardship because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ! And remember: usually *suffering hardship or animosity* could prompt a vengeful response; could bring out resentment from our hearts!

But our text exhorts you & me to show forbearance to *all* people!

Imagine you were a high-ranking rugby player, and you were told not to openly voice your religious convictions or else your contract with your rugby board will become null & void! Yet, one day, you go on twitter and proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, but you also proclaim the flipside of the Gospel, i.e. condemnation for all who live in conflict with God's Word! Imagine your rugby board then cancelled your contract!

What would you then do? Insist on your just due? Yes, would you then retaliate by taking your Rugby Board to court to see whatever compensation you could get out of them?

After all, in our secular country the law does allow for you to make use of your human rights! Or would you, for the sake of your Lord and for the Gospel, take your rugby board's decision on the chin and go seek some other work?

You see, my question is: If you were in such a position, and you retaliated (or insisted on your just due) what image of Christ and the Gospel would you be sending to the world?

Would you then not be doing exactly the same as the unbelievers and as some fanatics of false religions?

Remember 1 Pt 2:20... ***how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.***²¹

My brother & sister, what powerful witness to Christ and the Gospel *if you and I are not vengeful, non-retaliating* despite being harmed/wronged for our faith!

¹⁷ ἐπιεικείας Noun Feminine Singular Genitive of ἐπιείκεια, ας, ἡ "... the quality of making allowances despite facts that might suggest reason for a different reaction, *clemency, gentleness, graciousness, courtesy, indulgence, tolerance*" (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 371). Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

¹⁸ Literally: "...who, being insulted, did not return insult..." (ὃς λοιδορούμενος οὐκ ἀντελοιδορεῖ).

¹⁹ Literally: "...while suffering, He did not threaten" (πάσχων οὐκ ἠπειλεῖ).

²⁰ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pe 2:20–24). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

²¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pe 2:20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (Emphasis mine).

Question: What will give you & me the strength to be forbearing, big-hearted, non-retaliating?

Well, what verse 5 says: the knowledge that *The Lord is near* (v.5b)!²²

What does that mean – “*The Lord is near*”?

Well, it means the Lord’s nearness *at all times* to the believer. It also means the nearness of His coming – or even both!²³

Indeed, does not God’s Word say it over & over that He will take vengeance on your enemies, and reward your patience?²⁴

Well, so far re making our forbearance (non-retaliatory spirit) known to all people!
What other exhortation/command does our text give to Christians in this world?

Anxious, no more

Verse 6 exhorts/commands: “*Do not be anxious about anything...*”

My brother & sister, in this world the Christian might not just experience the day-to-day cares of life (cares for income, food, safety), but also cares/anxiousness when mocked, ostracised, attacked, or persecuted!

Granted, there is (and should be in us) a concern of *diligence*, which is our duty! That’s a concern which consists of *wise planning for the future*. But, in contrast to this, there is also such thing as *concern* – or rather *anxiousness* – and *distrust*, which is proof of our sin & folly! Such anxiousness only perplexes and distracts the Christian’s mind.

And so, what verse 6 says is: Do not be anxious about anything so as to in your anxiousness *distrust God* and make yourself unfit for His service!²⁵

Question: But what to do when you’re overtaken by such anxiousness?

Verse 6 says, “*By prayer and supplication... make your requests known to God!*”

And which Christian has not experienced this – i.e. that prayer is the antidote to being anxious!?

I love how someone has put it: “*Anxiety and prayer are more opposed to each other than fire and water*”²⁶ (Repeat).

But look! That’s not all that v.6 is saying! It does not just say, “*By prayer and supplication... make your requests known to God!*”

No, it says, “*By prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God!*”

²² In Greek, *ho kyrios enggys* (ὁ κύριος ἐγγύς).

²³ I agree with Foulkes, F. (1994). [Philippians](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1258). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

²⁴ Cf. Rm 12:19 *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

Also cf. Heb. 10:30; Cited from Deut. 32:35; [Ps. 94:1; 1 Thess. 4:6]

²⁵ My adaptation of Henry (ibid), “Observe, It is the duty and interest of Christians to live without care. There is a care of diligence which is our duty, and consists in a wise forecast and due concern; but there is a care of diffidence and distrust which is our sin and folly, and which only perplexes and distracts the mind. ‘*Be careful for nothing*, so as by your care to distrust God, and unfit yourselves for his service.’”

²⁶ Cf. J.A. Bengel (apud Foulkes, F. (1994). [Philippians](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1258). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press).

What does this mean?

Does it mean I have to thank God in advance for answering my prayer exactly as I have asked?

No!

It rather means that thanksgiving is the *basic and constant posture of the believer*; and that thanksgiving is the *proper mindset and heart-attitude* in which I petition God! Look, was it not thanksgiving that accentuated the Apostle Paul's whole life!? He simply could not imagine Christian life that was not a constant outpouring of gratitude to God!²⁷

Well, what is the result of such prayer?

It's peace – a peace even amidst hardship; therefore, a peace that passes human understanding – and a peace that will *guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*.²⁸

The picture is that of a military “garrison” that will guard²⁹ your & my hearts when anxiety threatens!³⁰

My brother & sister, here is my prayer for you & me (and our loved ones) for 2020 and beyond: that, unlike my Christian witness of forty-seven years ago during my conscription year, *your & my* witness to the Gospel will be powerful – yes will be filled...

- with rejoicing in our Lord Jesus
- with being slow to retaliate
- and with prayer which results in peace that passes understanding – a peace that will guard our hearts always and ever against anxiousness!

Wishing you a God-blessed New Year!

AMEN (2,477 words excluding footnotes)

²⁷ Cf. “Paul’s own life was accentuated by thanksgiving; and he could not imagine Christian life that was not a constant outpouring of gratitude to God. Thus *thanksgiving* does not mean to say “thank you” in advance for gifts to be received; rather, it is the absolutely basic posture of the believer and the proper context for petitioning God. It is also the key to the affirmation that follows” (Fee, G. D. (1999). [Philippians](#) (Vol. 11, pp. 166–181). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic).

²⁸ [New American Standard Bible: 1995 update](#). (1995). (Php 4:7). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

²⁹ Greek *frouḗsei* (φρουρήσει), Verb, Future, Indicative, Active 3rd Person Singular of φρουρέω “...to be on one’s guard against some eventuality—‘to guard against, to keep under watch, to watch over’...” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 485). New York: United Bible Societies).

³⁰ My adaptation of the well-said words of Thielman (ibid), “In the present context God’s peace will be his “garrison” (a striking military metaphor) around our *hearts* when anxiety threatens. It will also guard our “thoughts”—those very thoughts that lead to fear and distress and that keep one from trusting prayer.”