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Celebrating the Carefree Life

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)

The Cookie Thief

A woman was waiting at an airport one night with several long hours before her flight.

She hunted for a book in the airport shop, bought a bag of cookies, and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book but happened to see, that the man beside her, as bold as could be, grabbed a cookie or two from the bag between, which she tried to ignore, to avoid a scene.

She read, munched cookies, and watched the clock, as the gutsy “cookie thief” diminished her stock.

She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by, thinking, “If I wasn’t so nice, I’d blacken his eye!”

With each cookie she took, he took one too. When only one was left, she wondered what he’d do.

With a smile on his face and a nervous laugh, he took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half as he ate the other. She snatched it from him and thought, “Oh brother—

This guy has some nerve, and he’s also rude. Why, he didn’t even show any gratitude!”

She had never known when she had been so galled, and sighed with relief when her flight was called.

She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate, refusing to look back at the “thieving ingrate.”

She boarded the plane and sank in her seat, then sought her book, which was almost complete.

As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise. There was her bag of cookies in front of her eyes!

“If mine are here,” she moaned with despair, “then the others were his, and he tried to share!”

Too late to apologize, she realized with grief, that she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief.

(Author unknown.)

That story reminds me that sometimes in life you just have to laugh at yourself and not take yourself too seriously. Being carefree is no easy thing. There is a lot that bogs us down with the cares of the day. This is what I love about God’s Word. It can be so deep while, at the same time, so practical.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” But is that practical? Paul continues, “. . . *Do not be anxious about anything.*” I kind of like the way the King James Version expresses it: *“Be careful for nothing.”* That is actually a way of

expressing the negative side of “rejoicing.” Paul says that the way in which we can rejoice is to be “full of care about nothing” (don’t become filled with anxiety). Jesus was getting at the same thought when He taught:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25).

Both Paul and Jesus use the same word for “anxious.” When you look closely at what Jesus is saying, isn’t He teaching us to not get all hung up about all the daily necessities that so often occupy our minds, such as the clothes we have or don’t have? So much time and so much energy spent being full of care on things that, in the end, rob us of joy. It is hard, though, to break those thoughts. We have been trained since childhood to think just the opposite.

As my girls would go off to school or out with their friends, I said what every dad says: “Be careful.” Being full of care for nothing does not mean that we are careless. It does mean, however, that we rely on God to provide, rather than constantly worrying about it ourselves. We are able to relax our minds and our hearts, knowing that we are in His hands.

It is no accident, having said that we should be full of care for nothing, that Paul then says:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6).

The best way I know how to deal with worry is to stop focusing on me and to begin focusing on God. And the best way I know how to do that is in prayer and in worship. The result will be that God’s peace, beyond

my understanding, will guard my heart and mind and keep watch over me. His peace then helps me to let my mind and heart be at rest. I find it intriguing that the original language for “guard” is a military term for “sentry,” one who keeps watch over something valuable.

Rejoice. Relax. Rest. These three make it possible for me to celebrate.

I wish I could say that joy comes simply through prayer and telling ourselves not to worry. It isn’t that easy. You know that, and I know that. I am saved by grace and grace alone. I have no part in that whatsoever. This does not mean, however, that once I am in the faith God does not have certain expectations of me. Living with a spirit of joy and celebration is rooted in the peace that God alone provides me. Yet Paul, in the way of a command, places this right at our feet:

“Finally, brothers, 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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4: 8-9).

Each day, we are faced with decisions as to what we will allow our minds to focus on. I cannot expect my day or my heart to be filled with joy if I choose to let my mind dwell on sinful or ungodly thoughts, or if I fill my calendar and time with issues that have no eternal significance.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . .” (Galatians 5:22), but the soil of my heart is cultivated and nourished day by day with those things that I think and dwell on in my life.

Paul’s teaching is not easy, but it is right on the mark when he guides us to re-direct our focus and thinking. I really like the way in which Richard Foster expresses it in “Celebration of Discipline” when he writes:

“The decision to set the mind on the higher things of life is an act of the will. That is why celebration is a Discipline. It is not something that falls on our heads. It is the result of a consciously chosen way of thinking and living. When we choose this way, the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives and relationships, and the inevitable result will be joy” (p. 195).

Joy begins in the heart. All of our efforts will not give joy to life if the heart is not right. The only way to make the heart right is when we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus. If we are not right in Him and with Him, there will be no joy.

A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit . . . All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast” (Proverbs 15:13, 15).

While His righteousness gives me joy, I must remain alert. I know all too well that there is someone worse than the cookie thief who wants nothing less than to steal away the peace and joy I have in Jesus. Satan will seek to do this by filling my mind with worry. My confidence, however, rests in knowing that God’s peace, like a military sentry, will patrol the boundaries of my mind and keep me in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus, may the peace that you alone give guard my heart and mind in you this day. May your peace that passes my understanding halt every anxious thought from entering.
Amen.

Challenge: What will you allow your mind to dwell on this day? Try to focus on those things that are “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable and praiseworthy.”

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4

From the Book of Concord: “‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ In chapter 5[:1] he says: ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God,’ that is, we have tranquil and joyful consciences before God. And in Romans 10[:10]: ‘For one believes with the heart and so is justified.’ Here he states that faith is the righteousness of the heart. Galatians 2[:16]: ‘And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by . . . works of the law.’ Ephesians 2[:8–9]: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast’” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 136.91-93).