

Always

Philippians 4:4-9

November 22, 2009

(CHRIST THE KING / THANKSGIVING)

God is good! (All the time!) And all the time! (God is good!)

Rejoice in the Lord always. Let me say it again: Always rejoice! And let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

“Always,” says Paul. “Always rejoice!” For God really *is* good, you know. It says so right there in the bible. And I *believe* that. I do. God is good all the time.... It's just that *sometimes* the “**all the time**” is kind of hard to remember.

Let me tell you a little story, just to show you what I mean...

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Myrtle Moore (or Less, whichever it was) lived in the little town of Wayne, West Virginia, for... well, for ever, I think. And she lived there (for ever) in a big white house out on Roanoke Circle, which is not far from the Wayne Elementary School there on the hill. And she lived there (in that big white house) all alone. Because she had never married. Not that she didn't *intend* to, mind you. She did. Believe me... It's just that she couldn't get anyone else to cooperate with her. In fact, she told the women at her circle meeting one night that she started praying for a husband on her twentieth birthday, and she was sure God had *answered* her prayer that very night.

And one of the other women in the group said, “Myrtle, you can't be serious! You're still single!” And Myrtle said, “Yes, I am. But somewhere out there is a seventy-four year old man who's been resisting God's will for more than fifty years. And he's bound to wear down sooner or later!”

But in the meantime, Myrtle lived alone. With no one to talk to, not even a *dog*. Just Myrtle. All alone. In that big, old house on Roanoke Circle.

Some of her friends worried about her, of course. Thought she should move into a high-rise somewhere (in Huntington, maybe) ... where she'd be able to talk to other people anytime she wanted. Or call on them if something should happen. But she insisted she was fine right where she was. And she wanted nothing to do with that *rat race* in town -- the *big city*, she called it. ✘ But one of her friends said, "Well then, Myrtle, why don't you just get a pet." And Myrtle said, "A pet!?! I don't want some stinky animal living in my house." And that was the end of it. They dropped it like a hot potato and didn't dare bring the matter up again.

But the very next week, there was Miss Myrtle at the pet store asking lots of questions about the hamsters and the ferrets and the little goldfish there on the counter. But when someone asked if she wanted to buy something, she said, "Oh, no ... Just looking. That's all," she said. I'm just looking." Which was true, I think. She just wanted to see what they had. And see what her options might be. Not that she was actually thinking about buying something, mind you. She just wanted to see.

And she did.... She saw the cutest little turtles there by the angelfish. Tiny little turtles crawling around in a green plastic tub. Myrtle thought they were the most adorable things she had ever seen in her life. And she stood there for the longest time watching them wade in the water and climb up on the rocks. She even thought about buying one of them. She could make a little place for him in the kitchen, she thought. And she could talk to him while she did the dishes in the evening or when she had her morning coffee there at the table.

But then she thought of her neighbors. My uncle Charlie, of course, and Judge Ferguson, Luther the Bus Driver, of course, Doc White and all of the others. And she could just hear them laughing and saying, "How's the turtle, Myrtle?" And that's what they'd call her. They'd call her *Turtle Myrtle*, and they'd say, "Well, it's about time you came out of your shell Miss Myrtle." So she didn't buy it. She moved on and kept looking.

And as she did, she remembered reading somewhere that *birds* make wonderful pets. An article she read in a magazine somewhere said that birds had been

shown to have a *calming effect* on people. It said that people who kept them had lower blood pressure and seemed to sleep better at night. So Myrtle walked over to the other side of the store where they kept the birds. And there she saw the most beautiful creature she had ever seen in her life. It was a parrot. A beautiful green parrot with a bright red crest that looked like a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, she thought, on his little head. And it was love at first sight.

So she went to the clerk and said, “How much is he?” And the clerk said, “Oh, ma’am, *he’s* not for sale.” But Miss Myrtle said, “I’ll pay you what ever you want. Just tell me how much.” And the clerk said, “Lady, I couldn’t sell you that bird for any amount of money.” And she said, “Why? Why can’t you?” And he said, “Because that bird is like the prophet Isaiah. He is a bird of *unclean lips*.... A sailor owned him,” he said. “That bird’ll cuss the hat right off your head. Filthiest little mouth you’ve ever heard.”

But Myrtle looked at that bird and she just couldn’t help herself. She was in love. “Young man,” she said, “all that bird needs is some good old-fashioned love

and care (and a little dose a discipline), and he’ll be good as new.” And that was that. I mean, once Miss Myrtle had her mind made up, you might as well go along with it. And he did. He sold her the parrot and a little cage with a swing and a little ladder to climb on. And she took him home to the big white house on Roanoke Circle.

And as soon as they walked in the door, the little bird started cussing a blue streak. And Miss Myrtle said, “Now, Mr. Bird, we don’t talk like that in this house. You mind your manners.” And he looked at her and swore! And she said, “Mr. Bird, that’s not very Christian.” And he swore at her again! And Myrtle said, “Now, if you do that again, Mr. Bird, I’m going to half to punish you and put you in the ice box,” she said. “And maybe that’ll teach you to hold your tongue.”

Well the parrot just cussed up a storm. So Miss Myrtle opened the little door of his cage. And she reached in and grabbed him. And she stuck him in the freezer. And after maybe ten minutes or so, she opened the door and took him out. And the poor bird’s little feathers were frosted and he was shaking all

over. And Miss Myrtle said, “Now what do you have to say, Mr. Bird?” And the parrot looked up at Miss Myrtle, and said, “Whatever you say, Ma’am. Whatever you say.”

And while he was still shaking and shivering from the cold, he looked at her and squawked and said, “I just want to know one thing, lady.” He said, “What did the turkey do?”

Rejoice in the Lord always. Let me say it again: Always rejoice! And let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Thanksgiving is a time to count your blessings -- a time to take stock of your life and see just how blessed you really are. And we do. We do. Like Miss Myrtle's parrot we look around and see that things could be worse. Which may not be cause for celebration, mind you. But it does kind of put things in perspective, I

think. I mean, think about it ... we *could* all be turkeys. (To be honest, I think some of us already are!) So we give thanks. We count our blessings, breathe a sigh of relief, and say thanks to the Lord. Because things could be worse, you know. Really. They could.

But what do you do when things couldn't be worse? When your heart is heavy and your spirit is broken? When the bills and the burdens outnumber the blessings and you feel all alone?

Well ... Paul (the apostle) said, **“Rejoice. Be thankful. Lift up your hearts!”** Even when things couldn't be worse! **“Rejoice!”** says Paul. And the thing that gets me is he said it to them! To the *Philippians* of all people! When their hearts were heavy and their spirits were broken. I mean, things couldn't have been much worse for the Philippian people. For being a Christian in that place at that time wasn't easy. People swore at Christians back in those days! They wanted to hurt them, even destroy them back then. Because they just didn't trust these people with all of their talk about giving and loving and being the servants to the poor and the outcast. And when they heard them say things

like, “Jesus is risen,” or “Take and eat, this is my body,” or “Once I was blind, but now I see,” they thought they were nuts! “They’re crazy!” they thought -- “a threat to our values, our lifestyle, our way in the world!” And they were! They were!

But that isn’t all. There were problems at home, right there in the church! There were people there who were “out of commons,” my grandmother would say. They had “fallen out” for some reason and couldn’t agree. And that was a problem not just for then, mind you, but for everyone else in the church. It was like the **root of bitterness** the bible speaks of in Hebrews twelve. If it’s not taken care of -- if it isn’t all settled, somehow, it spreads through the church like some sort of disease. And it weakens the body, the body of Christ. At a time when they needed so *much* to be united and strong, they were weakened by all of this fighting and squabbling there in their church.

And on top of all *that* -- as if they didn’t have enough to deal with *already* -- there were all the *other* problems people face in this life. Things just couldn’t have been worse. At least, that’s how they felt.

Because the folks there at Philippi -- in the Philippian church, mind you -- were down in the dumps, and depressed, and deeply discouraged.

And then, one day a messenger came with a message -- a *letter* from Paul the Apostle to be read to the church. The whole church, that is. And you can almost see them coming together so heavy-hearted, with their spirits weighed down by so many things. And the bishop stands up, or maybe a deacon, and he starts to read this letter from Paul. And they’re sitting there waiting to hear some *encouraging* word, some bit of *advice* about *how they should live* and *what they should do* in these strange and difficult times that are so full of sorrow and sadness . . .

And they hear the bishop say, **Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always. Let me say it again: Always rejoice! Always be gentle with others . . .**

And the bishop reads on . . . And they hear Paul say to them, **The Lord is near. So stop all your worrying. Don’t fret about anything, but pray about everything. Let God in on every part of your life. (Let him in on**

your troubles. Let him in on your problems. Let him in on your hurts, and your fears, and on all that weighs so heavily on your heart. Tell him how it feels to be down in the dumps. Let him know how it feels when you're feeling let down.) And he will give you peace -- a peace beyond all understanding. So rejoice! he says. **Rejoice and be glad. For the Lord is near. (He is not far away).** ✕

If that letter had come from anyone else, I think, they could have ignored it. They could have treated it like a piece of junk mail or spam in their inbox. But it wasn't that, at all. And they couldn't ignore it. For this was a letter to the church from **Paul the Apostle . . . And Paul was in prison** -- when he wrote it to them. And they knew that. They did. They *knew* how it was for their *father in the faith*. And **they** knew that **he** knew what **they** were going through. Because he was there, too. And he wrote them this letter to remind them that **God** was there, too. And he would be with them, no matter what. So, **Rejoice!** he said.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Let me say it again: Always rejoice! And always be gentle with others . . . (For) the Lord is near . . . always.

And that's why we can give thanks. Because when we take stock -- when we count our blessings, however many or few they may seem there will always be one. And that one is greatest of all -- that the Lord is near. He is never as far away as we think. But he is always near. Always with us. Always there -- wherever you are (in your or life or your faith).

But let me tell you one more little story just to show you what I mean.... A young man named Mark lost his job just about this time in November, I think, not too many weeks before Christmas. And Mark, like Myrtle, lived in a big white house in a little town a lot like Wayne, I suppose. But he wasn't all alone there. He had a wife and a daughter and a little baby boy at home. And they all depended on him, he thought, for all they had. And all they had wasn't very much, really. Mark tried to save what he could. But with the new baby they had to dip into their savings. And now it was

almost gone. And so was his job. It was gone. For good. The company folded. Went out of business.

But there it was -- just a few weeks before Christmas -- the season to be jolly, it says in the song. But Mark wasn't jolly. He was anything but that. The truth is he was discouraged, heavy-hearted, weighed down with worry. Things couldn't be worse, he thought. Because he loved his family more than anything else in the world. And he wanted only the best for them, mind you. But the best he could do for them wasn't much, he thought. It just wasn't very much at all.

His wife would understand, he thought. There was no one else like her in all the world. But the little girl was three. Three years old going on nineteen, he always said. And he knew, he just knew that her heart would be broken.

So during those next few weeks before Christmas, he did everything he could do to earn a little extra. He raked leaves and washed cars and put up storm windows for people all over town. And with the money he earned he bought a little doll for his daughter, and a

necklace for his wife, and a little stuffed elephant with a rattle inside for the baby. And he bought a roll of gold foil wrapping paper to wrap all the gifts.

And he did. He wrapped the gifts and hid them away. And on Christmas Eve, the little girl who was three walked into the room with a box in her hand -- a gift for her father. And he could tell from the package that she had wrapped it all by herself. And she was so proud! She carried it into the room as if she was holding something precious, some rare and wonderful treasure. And she placed it under the Christmas tree. And she spun around and said, "I can't wait till Christmas!" And when Mark saw it his heart just sank. And he felt sick because he loved her so much. And what he had to give her that Christmas seemed so small, he thought, and so cheap.

It worried him. But it wasn't just worry, mind you. It was something more. Something cold and bitter and hard that just wouldn't go away. And he kept thinking, "Why, Lord? Why? Why did you let this happen to me?"

Things couldn't be worse, he thought. "Where are you, Lord?" ✕

The next morning was Christmas. So Mark gave his daughter the little doll he had wrapped up and tucked under the tree. And he gave the wee little baby the little stuffed elephant with the rattle inside. And he gave his wife the necklace ... And the little girl went to the tree and she picked up the package she'd wrapped all by herself. And she said, "Here, Daddy! This is for you!" And he opened the box and looked inside And it was empty.

He said, "There's nothing here. It's just a box!"

And the little girl looked up and said, "No it's not, Daddy. I put a kiss in the box just for you."

And what happened next, he said, he really couldn't explain. Tears started rolling down over his cheeks. And he hugged the child and held her close. And he had the strangest feeling, he said, that someone was watching them -- that somebody else was there in the room. And it was at that moment, he said, that his eyes

were opened. And he could see now that God wasn't somewhere far away. God was there. God was with them. There. In that very place. And it was as if a terrible burden was lifted from that young man's heart. And in its place, he said, was a feeling of peace that he couldn't explain.

Mark kept the box. Kept it there by his bed. And it stayed there for years. And every time he got discouraged -- every time his heart grew heavy -- and every time he felt all alone, he would open the box and gaze in wonder at that imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there in his heart. And every time he did, he remembered again that God is near.

And he is, you know. God is near. And that is the greatest blessing of all. So ...

Rejoice in the Lord always. Let me say it again: Always rejoice! And let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful

hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God.
And the peace of God, which passes all
understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds
in Christ Jesus.

Always.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria



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