

Guard Your Hearts and Your Minds
Philippians 4:1-9
March 12, 2023
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read Philippians 4:1-9

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matt. 4:4b)

Introduction – Raising the Bar

Voddie Baucham tells the story of when he was in high school and had gotten a C on a progress report. He was playing football at the time, so his mother told him he was done with football until he could pull that grade up. When his coach found out about his punishment, he called Voddie into his office and they called mom together. The conversation went something like this:

Coach Reeves: Mrs. Baucham, remember, this was only a progress report.

Mom: I am aware of that, Coach.

Coach Reeves: I assure you, Voddie will bring the grade up by the end of the semester.

Mom: Oh, trust me, I know he will. At least, he’d better.

Coach Reeves: Your son is one of the smartest players I have ever coached.

Mom: This is not about how dumb your other players are, this is about what I expect from my son.

Voddie doesn’t remember exactly what his mother said after that, but Coach Reeves’ side of the conversation suddenly turned into a series of “Yes, ma’ams,” “No, ma’ams,” and then “I understand.” Voddie would bring his grade up, then go on to excel academically from then on. He graduated near the top of his class, was a Merit Scholar, went on to get a Bachelors degree, two Masters, and a PhD.¹

When we raise the bar of expectations, we can see wonderful results when those we are leading or the children we are raising meet those expectations. You know the word picture that I mean when I say, “Raise the bar,” right? In the sports of high jumping and pole vaulting, there’s a bar that’s set and the athlete runs up and jumps backwards over it if it’s the high jump or forward over it in the pole vault. To raise the bar is to challenge yourself by seeing if you can go higher. And in life, there are so many ways that you can challenge yourself or those around you to try harder and achieve more. If we never raise the bar for ourselves, we’ll never know how much we can achieve and how much we can handle. If you want to live an average, unexciting life and you’re satisfied with mediocrity, then don’t worry about raising the bar for yourself or those around you. But if you want to make the most out of life, maximizing the gifts and talents that God has given you, and seeing how much you can actually achieve, then you’ll constantly be raising the bar.

Today’s sermon is about how Paul raised the bar of expectations for believers in the churches that he had started because he knew that God has a high bar for every believer. We, who are new creations in Christ, are expected to strive to be like our Savior. That’s the highest bar there is, and we’ll never actually achieve it on this side of heaven, but that doesn’t mean we don’t aim for it. We’ll see Paul set the bar high in several areas of life: our church life, our prayer life, and our thought life.

As we get into the passage, we usually think that churches are destroyed by outside enemies, but we need to remind ourselves that inner conflicts do a lot more damage. The first five verses show

¹ Voddie Baucham, *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem, 2021), pp. 18-19.

I. The High Bar of Reconciling Believers (vv. 1-5)

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. ² 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. ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;

Paul starts by calling the Philippians four things in verse 1: my brothers, my joy, my crown, and my beloved. So everything that follows after this is said from a heart of love from someone who seeks the best for them and is absolutely delighted in them and on their side, as he has shown throughout the letter. There is no sense that Paul was just saying that they needed to clean up their act so that they could make him look better. You all know that saying: “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” No one could accuse Paul of not caring and just bossing around his churches.

Paul called two women out by name: Euodia and Syntyche. Imagine having your name in one of the letters that was included in Holy Scripture for every generation after you so that you were remembered as one of the squabbling church ladies that Paul begged to get along. These were not just “seat fillers” or “pew warmers” in the church, they had labored side-by-side with Paul. The ESV translates the Greek word (*synethlesan*) as “labored,” but it can also be understood as “fought.”² So these two women fought hard with Paul for the advancement of the gospel, but now they were fighting one another. It’s one thing for fringe people or new people to find things to argue or complain about, it’s another thing when it’s the people who have given their blood, sweat, and tears to the ministry of the church. And these two women were true Christians, Paul was sure that their names were written in the book of life. Think about what he was saying: they were going to spend eternity in heaven together, but they just couldn’t get along on earth. It was time to heal that wound and start reflecting what their relationship in heaven will be like.

Paul used the word entreat, which can also be understood as “I urge you” or even “I beg you.” He didn’t take one side or the other, he said to come to an agreement, which tells us it was probably an issue of preference or a personality conflict, not a doctrinal issue. We don’t know what the issue was, but their spirit of comradery as a team to advance the church’s mission had given way to a spirit of dissension. Hopefully the words of the earlier parts of the letter were still ringing in their ears; chapter 2 said: “*complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus.*” Paul had given them the tools, the explanation for getting along, for resolving conflict; it was time to apply them.

This issue wasn’t just between two women, it was affecting the whole church. And if they couldn’t resolve it between the two of them, the church needed to step in. Paul asked someone in the church whom he referred to as “true companion” to help these women. We don’t know who the true companion was, most likely someone who travelled with Paul, but it’s someone who was respected in the church and who was capable of being a peacemaker. Have you ever been called in as the peacemaker in a situation? I have. It’s not always great, not always fun, but it’s so important. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6 that any member of a church who was wise enough could settle matters between believers, and Jesus said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers.*” I’ve known churches that have

² R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), p. 165.

hired mediators, outside consultants who will come in and work things through. And our Presbytery has the power to appoint a commission to intervene and help churches work towards resolving conflicts if they need to. But any one of us can participate in the work of reconciliation.

1 Corinthians 12:26 says that *“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”* Do we believe this about our church family – that we are so intimately connected as the body of Christ that we all feel one another’s pain and joy? Then we have a responsibility to be reconciled to one another and not let anger and disunity fester. We all have the possibility of being the problem. So we should all be ready to ask for help in solving our issues with one another, and we should all be ready to step in and help others work through theirs. Is there someone that you need to clear the air with? Some conflict that threatens to spill over and disrupt the peace and purity of this church? Paul would urge each of us to reconcile and heal our rifts.

Verse 4 is one of those coffee mug/bookmark verses – *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”* We quote that verse by itself, but in its context, it seems to be saying that those who are angry with one another should lift their minds and their hearts to the Lord and remember His vast blessings; that can put their present conflict in perspective. Then verse 5: the ESV translates it as *“let your reasonableness be known,”* but other ways to translate that word are “gentleness” or “gentle spirit” or “graciousness.” Whatever word you go with, it’s the opposite of being contentious and self-seeking. It’s the willingness to yield your personal rights, to treat others better than yourself. The implication is that if you are grace-filled and loving with one another in the church, everyone, even those outside the church, will see it. No one wants to come into a church where everyone’s mad at each other, where they can’t work things out and they harbor long grudges.

The next four verses move to a new topic,

II. The High Bar of Praying About Everything (vv. 6-7)

6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

It’s interesting that the Greek word (*merimna*) translated “anxious” in verse 6 where it says *“be anxious for nothing”* is the same word that Paul used in Philippians 2:20 to say that Timothy was *“concerned for you welfare.”*³ So is anxiety/concern a good thing or a bad thing? It depends what you’re anxious or concerned about, right? If it’s other people and how they’re doing, as it was for Timothy, it’s a wonderful thing. If it’s a crippling anxiety about your life and your circumstances that becomes a consuming worry because you’re failing to trust that God will guide and protect you, it’s not so good. There are plenty of things to be anxious about: your health, your job, your kids, your parents, your friendships, your finances, the future... The biggest antidote to anxiety and worry is prayer. Verses 6 and 7 urge us to meet the biggest challenges and biggest stresses in our lives with prayer. Supplication is asking God for His supply, His giving us what we need, presenting our requests to Him. That has to be done in a spirit of thankfulness, right? Not a spirit of demand or entitlement, but humble gratitude that the Lord would be so kind as to give us anything.

The final phrase says that God’s peace *“will guard your hearts and your minds.”* Think about Paul being guarded by Roman centurions in his house arrest. Then think of Paul saying that your heart and mind can be that tightly guarded by God’s peace. Nothing can get to them to disturb and upset them when you have prayed and received God’s peace. How many times have I gotten all upset and

³ Steven J. Lawson, *Philippians For You* (India: The Good Book, 2017), p. 121.

wrapped up around something, anxious and worried about something going on? And I have to smack myself on the side of the head, “Why have you not even prayed about it?” I’ve been a Christian my whole life and a pastor for a long time, but I still forget, as the old hymn says, “what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.” Martin Luther used to say, “Pray and let God worry.”

The final area that Paul addresses is

III. The High Bar of Elevating Our Thought Lives (vv. 8-9)

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me— practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

We dwell on what is true because lies, whether we tell them or believe them, lead us to living in darkness. We dwell on what is honorable and pure because those things raise us up; we lift our minds above the frivolous, corrupt, and debased things that this world loves to celebrate. We dwell on things that are just because injustice and illegal activities have no part in the life of a follower of Jesus. We desire the lovely over the crude, ugly, and negative images and attitudes of the world. We strive for what is commendable because those who represent a holy God should be dwelling upon what is morally respectable. And we seek out that which is excellent and worthy of praise because then our minds are focused on the things that God commends. Paul and his companions modelled these things as they strove to “*take every thought captive to Christ*” (2 Cor. 10:5). And, for the second time in three verses, Paul says that God’s peace, God’s *shalom*, will be with you.

I don’t think that I had ever heard this before this week, but I read that the list of virtues in verse 8 are essentially a list of admirable traits drawn from the Greek philosophers and ethicists.⁴ So, was Paul trying to accommodate his faith to the surrounding culture? I don’t think so, Paul never did that in a way that changed the message. I think we are seeing a good example of “common grace” – these were virtues that were praised by both unbelievers and believers. Paul took the best attitudes and attributes that the surrounding culture applauded, and reminded Christians that they were godly traits as well.

The way that I’ve often heard verse 8 used is to keep Christians from watching R rated movies or reading literature that is dark or listening to non-Christian music. And there is definitely some good application to what we watch, listen to, read, and subject ourselves to; we should not expect to plunge ourselves into filthy shows and music with harsh language and ungodly themes without it influencing us. But does that mean that we can only watch or read things produced by Christians? Do we have to wall ourselves off from the world and live in a Christian bubble? Do we have to stop reading the paper or watching the news when something negative comes on? I don’t think that it means that. We need to learn discernment to interact with the world’s ideas; we can’t run away from them in the same way that we can’t run away from our neighbors and friends who aren’t Christians. We have to engage them. I think part of the idea here is that we should look for common grace where we can find it in the culture around us. God has written his law on every heart, even those who suppress the knowledge of Him, and we should applaud when we see honorable and excellent things in secular culture.

When we can engage culture and art with discernment, we carry the principles of Christian freedom with us: that some of it we can handle, some of it we can’t or shouldn’t. 1 Corinthians 10:23 is a

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (Louisville: John Knox, 2012), p. 73.

good guide: *"All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up."* All is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. I can handle war and some violent movies, other people cannot handle violence at all. I can't handle horror movies with gore, other people can. I would say that most of us probably need to realize that we watch too much trash, and that it would be a good thing to elevate the products that we consume. There is zero reason to watch Magic Mike movies, Fifty Shades of Gray, or the ridiculously violent John Wick movies. I mentioned in my pastor's thought the recent movie *Women Talking*, which is a look at how women in a closed religious community are dealing with the aftermath of a series of rapes and attacks by the men in the community. Some people would argue that that is too dark to pass the high bar of these verses and that we should not dwell on those things, but it's what people are dealing with in real life. If we want to engage the world and its problems in a godly way, we cannot just turn away in disgust or bury our heads in the sand. Look for what is excellent and worthy of praise, and think about these things.

Conclusion

To wrap up our points here: we've talked about raising the bar of expectations. How do we challenge ourselves and one another to shoot for higher and better things? Do we start with a really high bar for everyone in every area? Do we expect peaceful relationships, constant prayer, and pure thoughts from everyone at all times? Well, do high jumpers start by setting the bar at the current world record and just keep jumping until they reach it? No, they set it at a height they can achieve and then raise the bar a little at a time. Our Christian lives can look something like that: we work on what we can do, and we challenge ourselves and one another to attempt the higher goal next time. You're not going to go from never praying to being constantly in prayer, but you can certainly set aside a time for prayer every day. You're not going to go from never reading the Bible to reading the whole Bible in a year, most likely, so read 5 minutes a day and then increase that as time goes on. Challenge yourself not to escape into your own world of personal entertainment, but to interact with others and cultivate deep relationships.

We've been talking about high bars. Does salvation have a high bar to achieve? On the one hand, it does: Jesus said (in Matthew 5:48) that, *"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* Oh, is that it? I just have to be perfect and never sin? Correct. Do that and you will earn eternal life. The problem is that not only do we sin constantly in thought, word, and deed, but we are born with a sin nature that is fallen and predisposed to evil. So, clearly, that bar is too high for us to get over – we are all so far from perfect, it's not even possible to achieve. So maybe there's a different way to get into heaven, and maybe we need to think about a very low bar. One that's so far down that anyone could get over it. The thing you have to do to clear this bar is to humble yourself, make yourself so low because you admit that you can't do anything to save yourself. And in your humility, you recognize that there is someone who passed that high bar of perfection for you. Someone else who is willing to meet the standard for your sins to be forgiven and to earn right standing before God the Father. Jesus has paid the penalty for your sins by living a perfect life, then dying a sacrificial death. This passage mentioned the peace of God several times – to get peace with God, we must be reconciled to Him through Jesus. He is our joy and our salvation. And all those who have peace with God through Christ said, "Amen."

Benediction - Ephesians 3:14-17a – *"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."*