



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“NO WHINING!”

Philippians 4:2-20



A friend of mine told me that for Christmas last year, his wife had purchased a week of private lessons at the local health club for him. He was still in good shape since playing on his high school softball team, so he decided it would be a good idea to go ahead and give it a try. He called the club and made his reservations with a personal trainer named Tawny, who identified herself as a 26-year old aerobics instructor and model for athletic clothing and swim wear. He told me his wife seemed pleased with his enthusiasm to get started. The club encouraged him to keep a diary to chart his progress.

Monday came. He got up at 6:00 AM--tough to get out of bed, but he found it was well worth it when he arrived at the health club to find Tawny waiting for him. She was something of a goddess with blond hair, dancing eyes, and a dazzling white smile. WOO HOO!!! Tawny gave him a tour and showed him the machines. She took his pulse after five minutes on the treadmill. She was alarmed that his pulse was so fast, but he attributed that to standing next to her in her aerobic outfit. He hung around and enjoyed watching the skillful way in which she conducted her aerobics class after his own workout. Very inspiring. Tawny had also been encouraging as he did his sit-ups, although, he said, his gut was already aching from holding it in the whole time she was around. He knew this was going to be a FANTASTIC week!!!

Then it was Tuesday. He said he drank a whole pot of coffee, and finally made it out of the door. Tawny made him lie on his back and push a heavy iron bar into the air...then she put weights on it! His legs were a little wobbly on the treadmill, but he made the full mile. Tawny's rewarding smile had made it all worth while. “I feel GREAT!!!” he said. “It's a whole new life for me.”

Wednesday: he said, the only way he could brush his teeth that morning was by laying the toothbrush on the counter and moving his mouth back and forth over it. He thought he had a hernia in both pectorals. Driving was OK--as long as he didn't try to steer or stop. He parked his car on top of a fire hydrant in the club lot. When he got inside, Tawny was impatient with him, insisting that his screams bothered the other club members. Her voice was a little too perky for so early in the morning, he thought; and when she scolds, she gets this nasally whine that is VERY annoying. That day, his chest hurt when he got on the treadmill, so Tawny put him on the stair monster. Why in THE WORLD would anyone invent a machine to simulate an activity rendered obsolete by elevators? Tawny told him it would help him get in shape and enjoy life.

Thursday: Tawny was waiting for my friend with her vampire-like teeth exposed as her thin, cruel lips were pulled back in a full snarl. He couldn't help being a half hour late, he said; it took that long for him to tie his shoes. Tawny took him to work out with dumbbells. When she

was not looking, my friend ran and hid in the men's room. She sent Lars to find him, then, as punishment, put him on the rowing machine... which he sank.

Friday: My friend now disliked Tawny more than any human being had ever disliked any other human being in the history of the world. He saw her as a stupid, skinny, anemic little cheerleader wanna-be. If there was a part of his body he could move without unbearable pain, he would have beaten her with it. Tawny wanted him to work on his triceps. He said he was sure he didn't have any triceps! And if you don't want dents in the floor, he told her, don't hand me barbells or anything that weighs more than a sandwich. By now he was sure she had learned her trade in the sadist school, and she must have graduated magna cum laude. The treadmill flung him off and he landed on a health and P.E. teacher. "Why couldn't it have been someone softer?" he wondered.

Saturday: Tawny had left a message on his answering machine in her grating, shrilly voice wondering why he had not shown up that morning. Just hearing her made him want to smash the machine with a hammer. However, he said, he lacked the strength even to use the TV remote, and ended up watching eleven straight hours of the weather channel.

Sunday: He called his church and asked for the van to come by and pick him up for services today so he could go and thank God that this week was over. He told me he will also pray that next year his wife will choose a gift for him that is fun...like a root canal or a prostatectomy.

Whining. It can be so irritating. I confess, I was a champion whiner as a kid. Whining is childish maneuver to get our way—whatever our age—by playing on our perceived helplessness in order to shift responsibility to someone else.

Today in this last study of Paul's letter to Philippian Christians, we'll see he was no whiner, though he had suffered a lot of disappointments. In each case, he had made the best of it, and looked for creative ways to make every circumstance serve Christ. How did he do that?

Please open your Bibles to Philippians, chapter 4. Listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. [*Phil. 4:2-20*]

We think Paul wrote this letter not long before he was martyred, sitting for these last months in a Roman prison, cared for by Christians in the city, and by friends from some of the churches he had started in other places, who traveled all that distance to bring him what he needed, and carried messages back and forth to these people he loved. If you read the whole letter when you get home today (a good idea, just to set it in your mind after all these weeks), you'll notice Paul started with a rather chipper picture of how his imprisonment there had been made profitable for Master Jesus, in that he got to talk with many people he would never have met, otherwise. Also, the other Christians living in Rome had been inspired by Paul's example, and **THEY** had become much more active in sharing their faith and leading more women and men to start a new life "in Christ"—one of Paul's favorite phrases.

Now Paul is winding up his message. And it seems to me, anyway, that he has begun to accept that he may not succeed in making his case to Caesar, the Roman Emperor. He had been charged with inciting a riot, and public order was so important to the Romans—especially in traditionally rebellious areas like the province of Judea—that inciting a riot could be a capital

crime. Would he be able to make these pagan rulers understand the call of Christ on his life? Maybe not.

If Paul had some thoughts like these, then this letter to his dear friends at Philippi might be his last to them. So, what does he start with? Trying to make peace between two prominent women back there, asking for additional help from dear friends there.

Now, why bother? Is this argument between two women really worth his precious parchment? Apparently so. Then, what does this tell you about what Paul thinks is important? Relationships are very important. Church relationships are to be deep enough that we have conflict—serious conflict—and that we work that out.

Church, we often say, is a family. A psychologist friend of mine cautioned me about using that language too frequently, because 1) it sets people up for some idealized, wish-filled fantasy of a family they never had, and 2) “family” words can trigger unhealthy behaviors from our families of origin, brought to church. For example, when my mother and father divorced in Detroit, Dad’s sister and brother in law, Willa and Dal, living in Ohio, tried to keep a friendship with both my mother and my father. But my father interpreted that as “disloyalty”, as a real slam against him. So he cut off that part of the family from our lives, telling us never to speak with them or write them—my aunt and uncle. What would it be like if I carried that learned pattern into my church relationships?

When we say, “church family”, we are talking about a do-over. In our Life Groups, we have an opportunity to try some new ways of building loving relationships, and learning new things. We have a chance to heal some of our hurts from our families of origin. We can learn how to have conflict and yet love each other, still. But that kind of risk is scary for many of us. So we keep our relationships on the surface; and if we disagree, we find another church rather than work our conflict through and solidify our love for each other.

In verses 4-7, it sounds like Paul is wrapping it up. It’s a great ending point, exhorting his friends to positive care for each other. Verse 4 used to be Bessie Eichorn’s theme verse—and it’s one of our Act Two Values—“Rejoicing always”.

These verses really show the depth of Paul’s character. He can call on his friends to rejoice, to be gentle with everyone, and to savor the peace that comes only from God’s indwelling spirit—he does all this as he sits chained to a Roman guard in prison, with perhaps not long to live. Indeed, it’s hard to understand that, as human beings. We get anxious. We whine when even trivial things don’t go our way. How could Paul exude that kind of peace and poise from prison?

The Answer is, Paul wasn’t alone. When he wrote, “The Lord is near,” I think there are at least two senses in which that was true. For more than 50 years, a group of Bible scholars have seen how common it was in Christian and some Jewish circles in Jesus’ time to believe that the end of the age Jesus talked about was just around the corner. That would explain a lot of things, including Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, after he had failed to get the Master to kick off the final battle against the Romans. Paul here may mean, “The Lord is near,” (near, in the sense of “near in time”)—coming soon.

But “The Lord was near” Paul while he was in prison, too. Paul spoke with Master Jesus, and “our Father in Heaven”, by means of the Holy Spirit. Paul was in the habit of giving every

moment of his life to God, asking “the Big Guy” how he should handle this, or that, challenge. And that nearness was Paul’s choice, of course, just as it is your choice and my choice.

Where do you meet with God? If, as Rick Warren wrote, “the purpose of our Christian lives here is to get us ready for eternity” which believers will spend in worship forever, then we ought to practice now the communication with God that will direct our preparations and give us little “appetizers of eternity” now, don’t you think? So many Christians say “the magic words: Jesus is my Lord and Savior”, and join a church, and they think they’re done. They haven’t been taught any more. But the truth is, the Christian life is a growing relationship with God-- not membership in a club, or even “fire insurance”. That’s why so few Christians are mature in faith, able and eager to lead others to Jesus. And we will be judged by God for our defiant immaturity. Most Christians don’t believe there is a judgment for believers, but the Bible says differently. How ready are you for your final exam with God? Are you as ready as Paul clearly was?

Then Paul gives us a great piece of guidance for the continual reform and growth of our character, which is the center of our purpose if we love God. He says, “Choose what you fill you mind with.”

Are you one of those people who just leaves the TV on, or radio or iPod running, while you work or drive or sleep? What are you filling your mind with? Are you a news junkie? If so, you are probably more anxious than those around you, for the news seems to be one bad thing after another, with a cute animal story thrown in for an “aw, gee” relief. The thing is, we come to resemble what we fill our mind with. If we fill our minds with pornography, we start thinking of others as existing just to make us feel good, sexually. If we fill our minds with talk radio hate, we come to disapprove, devalue, and verbally destroy people who disagree with us—it’s what we hear rehearsed, hour after hour. If we fill our minds with visions of what wonderful people young children can grow up and become, then we use our time to nurture that character in our kids. What is the more frequent content you put into your mind, or allow to be put into your mind? “Make a good choice,” Paul says. That, too, helps explain his character. He was aiming to become like Christ, and that was leaking out even in this letter to dear friends. He finishes this section by saying, “The God of peace will be with you.” It’s not just “the peace of God” (verse 7), but it’s “the God of peace.” Peace, inner calm, is not enough. The goal is to experience God, listen to God, walk with God.

We’d better get to practicing this presence of God in times when we’re away from the hubbub of life, because it’s not likely, Dallas Willard points out in his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, that we’ll magically have a great insight from God in the moment of crisis. Yet that’s the way a lot of Christians imagine God comes through. Really? That’s a *wish*, not reality. You and I might *like* God to give us a big “neon light” message when we need it during a time of stress, but that’s like *wishing* to run in the Olympics without training for the years that are required. It’s the same with God. We need to get used to His voice, so that we can detect it and respond to it, too; after all, God is our “coach” for LIFE. We have to shape our lives toward Him, in order to receive from him all He wants to give us in a changed character. Only THEN are we even remotely capable of responding well in a moment of crisis, or taking initiative to join Him in what He is doing, day by day.

Paul began this paragraph with, “Finally, brothers, . . .” , setting us up to expect that he was winding it up. But it seems, just as he’s about to sign off, he suddenly feels moved to add warm words of thanks to these people who have helped him so much during his imprisonment.

Perhaps he wants to be sure he leaves nothing unsaid—again, in the back of his mind, he may sense this is his last opportunity, and he wants no regrets. So he adds these words of thanks, starting in verse 10, to the end of the chapter.

Paul doesn't whine. He has learned (he doesn't say, "I've always been"; he says, I have learned) to be content with a lot, or a little. It's all good, we might say. Paul doesn't whine when the chips are down. In Second Corinthians 11, Paul wrote, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely [than any other servant of Christ], and [I have] been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (2 Cor 11:23-30, NIV) Paul did not whine because he was fully committed to his life in Christ. Whining would only get in the way.

How are you about whining? Can we make church a "no whining zone"? Can we listen to each other--but then help each other find the resources and remember our power to choose our attitude? Like Paul, can we make life so much less about ourselves, and more about Jesus, who gave his life so we might live with God forever—including NOW??? Can we hold each other responsible for connecting with God, and getting with GOD's agenda, instead of the pain-free life we think we deserve?

*Today upon the bus I saw a lovely maiden with golden hair
I envied her because she looked so fine and wished I was as fair.
And suddenly as she rose to leave
I watched her hobble down the aisle.
She had one leg and wore a brace, but as she passed, a smile.
O God, forgive me when I whine, I've got two legs,
The world is mine.
And then I stopped to buy some sweets,
The boy who sold them was so fine.
I talked with him, and he said to me,
"You know, it's good to talk with folks like you.
You see," he said, "I'm blind."
O God, forgive me when I whine, I have two eyes,
The world is mine.
Then walking down the street*

*I saw a lad with eyes of blue.
He stood and watched the others play
But seemed he did not know what to do.
So I watched him for a moment and then I said:
"Hey, don't you know the others here?"
He looked ahead without a word and then I knew he could not hear.
O God, forgive me when I whine, I have two ears,
The world is mine.
With feet to take me where I go
With eyes to see the sunset glow,
With ears to hear what I need to know
O God, forgive me when I whine.
I'm blessed indeed, the world is mine.*

Bring yourself near to God, and God will come near to you. Then take this world and make it God's. And the God of peace will be with you.!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on August 23, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]