

## **“Out Through All The Earth”**

### **Philippians 4:1-9**

Therefore, my brothers and sisters,  
whom I love and long for, my joy and crown,  
stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche  
to be of the same mind in the Lord.

Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,  
help these women, for they have struggled beside me  
in the work of the gospel,  
together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers  
whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.  
Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer  
and supplication with thanksgiving  
let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable,  
whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing,  
whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence  
and if there is anything worthy of praise,  
think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received  
and heard and seen in me,  
and the God of peace will be with you.

## **Rejoicing In The Lord Always**

Philippians 4:1-9

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### **I.**

Today I would like to begin by telling you about an old college friend of mine, Dr. Linds Adams. Of course, I knew him by a different name four decades ago when we first met. Back then, he was *Lindsay* Adams.

Last time I spoke with him, which must have been 20 years ago, he told me he had changed his name, legally, to “Linds.” A subtle, but distinct change which he enacted for what he considered very good reason. Prior to the name change, he was constantly correcting people as to the proper pronunciation of his first name: *Lindsay*, rather than *Lindsey*. In his ethnically English background, the former is used to denote a male, and the latter a female. Of course, *Lindsey* is much more common so whenever people met him they always assumed it was *Lindsey* and not *Lindsay*.

### **II.**

This, as you might imagine, was a significant distinction to him. Tired of the repeated mispronunciation and required correction, his solution was to simply shorten his name, legally, to “Linds.” So it was that the last time we spoke he told me of the name change, and I said, “That’s fine with me, ‘Linds’ it is.” Then I asked him, “How is that going for you?” “Not so good,” he responded, “everyone says, ‘Linds,’ what is that short for ‘Lindsey’?” Which I thought was pretty funny, to go through all that trouble only to end up with the very same place. Clearly, though, he was *not* amused in the least.

All of that notwithstanding, Linds was (and, I can only assume, still is) a rather brilliant dude, in something of a quirky, mad scientist kind of way. I remember when he was getting his Ph.D. in psychology, he devised a very obvious, but stunningly insightful subject for his doctoral thesis: “What do you think about every day?” Which I’ve thought about almost every day since, because I think it is a stroke of sheer *genius*.

### III.

Though the horse is already out of the barn, I should have given fair warning to you, at the onset, that once I made you aware of this you, *too*, might find yourself thinking about what you think about every day. While this certainly may be a curse I am hoping, instead, that this idea might become something of a blessing to you. That is the plan, anyway.

While I do not wish, or need, to get into *all* of the research (and there is a ton of it out there, across any number of disciplines) about how people have the ability to shape or reshape their own thinking and, even, rewire their brains in order to engage the world in ways that are more fruitful, I will share two with you which are of particular note.

### IV.

The first, is the Harvard Happiness Project. In 1938, Harvard researchers embarked on a decades-long study to find out: What makes us happy in life. Researchers gathered health records from 724 participants from the world over and asked detailed questions about their lives at two-year intervals. Contrary to what one might think, it is not career achievement, money, exercise, or a healthy diet that matter most. Instead, the most consistent finding through 85 years of study is this: Positive relationships are what keep us happier, healthier, and help us live longer. Period.

Of course, academia being academia, they had to come up with a snazzier term: “Social Fitness,” That is, taking stock of our relationships, and being honest with ourselves about where we are devoting our time and whether we are tending to the connections that help us thrive. Like any form of fitness, Social Fitness requires constant and consistent exercise.

*(Click here on this [link](#) to a TED Talk if you would like to delve deeper.)*

### V.

Not to be outdone by their colleagues up in Bean Town, an Eli down at Yale recently devised a 10 week on-line course, in which anyone might enroll at no cost, called “The Science of Well-Being.” *(Click on this [link](#) to check it out.)* The course explains our own misconceptions about happiness, annoying features of the mind that can lead us to think irrationally about happiness, and the research that can help us change.

I would share with you 3 “take-aways” from the course on the science of well-being. First, that we, as a society, have the notion of happiness all wrong; that we are ‘miswanting.’ The things we yearn for, such as more money, the perfect body, and even true love, are ultimately not going to make us happy. Second, that real change is hard and requires “reirement”; that lasting change takes time and commitment in order to form the new habits. Third, that **happiness is truly internal**.

## **VI.**

Retreat Coach extraordinaire, Linda Potter, actually took the course last year as something of a winter project, and as a way of informing the work she does with her “Wise Woman” groups which meet monthly throughout the year. When I asked her what *she* learned, she said that happiness is very much in our control. What matters is how we choose to see events, and the choices we make not to effect external change, but as part of our “inside work.”

Linda also said that while none of this was new to her, the course did help her reinforce what she already knew, and to see things in a new way. Which is the very same purpose of this morning’s sermon in examining Philippians 4: to remind us of what we already know, and to help us see ourselves in a new way. Consider this an in-person, scriptural, crash course born not out of scientific research, or some new age, touchy-feely, watered-down version of the Gospel, but out of a real urgency and necessity to preserve the unity of the faith.

## **VII.**

Turning to the text, it seems that Euodia and Syntyche had worked directly with Paul to spread the gospel in the city of Phillipi, although it is unclear in what manner. As we read in Acts ch. 16, the church had actually begun as a women’s prayer meeting, and it is quite possible that Euodia and Syntyche were part of that original group. What we do know for sure, is that these two women were at odds with each other. It is likely the brouhaha was a public one, due to the fact that Paul had heard about it even though he was in prison in Rome. With the unity of the Philippian church at stake, Paul authors this epistle to address the dissension in the church. Picking it up in today’s passage, after a bit of context Paul gets right to the point: “Rejoice in the Lord *always*; again I will say, *Rejoice*.”

## VIII.

So that we are clear, this is no Dick Van Dyke admonishing Janet Leigh to “put on a happy face” kind of thing. Instead, the insistence that we rejoice is the result of a finely honed theological argument which understands that contained within the fullness of Christ’s work on the cross is the profound privilege we have to be *able* to rejoice if we so choose (i.e., that such an option exists and we have the agency to engage in it) and, moreover, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ demands nothing less than our best efforts to do so. Not only does rejoicing create happiness and well-being in the *individual*, rejoicing is the practical and real-life mechanism by which we bring *unity to the community* in which we live. Rejoicing is both a privilege and an imperative, our prerogative and our necessity.

## IX.

Paul then goes on to articulate what constitutes rejoicing. First, allowing our gentleness be known to *everyone*. Gentleness is a strength, not a weakness. Next we must create the *space* to rejoice, and we do so when we stop worrying about everything all the time. We also begin to do so, when we are honest about our needs so as to allow others the opportunity to help us. Moreover, when we let go and let God, the peace of God rests upon us to guard our hearts and minds.

Finally, says the Apostle Paul, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about *these* things. Because, as Dr. Linds Adams interestingly inquired, what we think about everyday matters greatly.

## X.

Though perhaps a bit overused, there is a concise and helpful saying on the subject I would share with you: *The thought manifests as the word; the word manifests as the deed; the deed develops into habit; habit hardens into character. So, watch the thought and its ways with care.*

Often misattributed, variously, to the Buddha, Lao Tzu and Ralph Waldo Emerson (among others) the saying actually evolved over a long period of time through a succession of speeches, moral instructions and, perhaps not so surprisingly, sermons which were often based on Jeremiah 4:14: “*Watch your*

*thoughts, for sin begins with thought, and how long will vain thoughts be with you?"*

Point being, the idea that what we think about everyday is *the* primary determinant of our happiness and well-being is really nothing new. In fact, the notion is as old as the hills, found across numerous cultures and a variety of literary sources including the Bible, and has been scientifically studied and proven.

## **XI.**

All of which makes today's reading from Philippians all the more interesting, if not downright provocative. Clearly, the Apostle Paul is up to speed on the importance of what we chose to think about every day, and how it informs and shapes our lives. Among all the possible notions, ideas or topics a seminal theologian such as Paul might lift up as *the* most important, it is not Christ, or the cross, or grace, or faith, or discipleship, or salvation to which we are to direct our daily attention. Instead, Paul what commends to the church at Philippi, as well as to the Church on the Park, is to rejoice...in the Lord... always. Gratitude and thankfulness, given bold and exuberant expression for all God *has* done and *is* doing for us, applied over and over again every day in the face of any and all circumstances.

## **XII.**

Whereas the things we think about every day directly dictate the happiness and well-being of the individual, thinking specifically and especially, about *rejoicing*, dictates the happiness and well-being of the community and of the world. For Paul, rejoicing is not a place holder, or the occasional diversion, or something nice to do when we have the time. Instead, rejoicing as a practiced art is *the* tone setter for our lives and our world.

In a few minutes we will depart from this place and return to our usual existence. Given today's sermon, I suspect that many of us may find ourselves thinking about what we think about every day. In those moments, I would like to suggest that you place rejoicing at the center of your attention. Specifically, the reason *why* we should rejoice, *how* we might rejoice, and the God who gives us ample *cause* to rejoice. What I believe you will find is a subtle, but distinct change that will matter greatly to you, to our church, and to our world. Rejoice in the Lord *always*; again I will say, Rejoice.