

Covid, An Appropriate Response

Part Two

*Your Forbearing Spirit
(Philippians 4:5a)*

With Study Questions

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2/7/2021*

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Preface

As I have previously stated, in my estimation the best method of preaching is verse by verse through as much of the Scriptures as possible. This, more than any other routine, presses the pastor to “**declare the whole counsel of God**” (Acts 20:27). Too often, ministers will grind their theological axes and pet doctrines. Of course, even when preaching verse by verse it is possible to highlight only that which the teacher desires to emphasize.

Nonetheless, in my judgment this is the most edifying process. Yet there are times when occasions arise that warrant a topical message. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the fascism of the thirties come to mind as an extreme example. 9/11 would be a more modern example. So, we are departing from our current series to address a challenge facing the culture and the church. In our next meeting we will recontinue Route Sixty-Six.

Review

In quick review, we spoke last time of embracing suffering as a means by which God refines His children to bring us the “**peaceful fruit of righteousness**” (Hebrews 12:11). It is my prayer and objective that we would embrace the political turmoil and the Covid challenge in such a way as to avoid profaning and cursing God’s providence in these matters. A rebellious or disobedient response to God’s sovereign hand will not yield the desired blessing.

Pastorally, my biggest concern has to do with our relationships with one another. A member reminded me of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural in which he sought to bring a nation together; a nation which consisted of

families, classmates and fellow soldiers who, for a time, were killing one another in the Civil War. A daunting task indeed!

A wedge threatens the church (all churches as far as I can tell) based upon the differences of opinions on an appropriate response to Covid in particular (though it is inextricably linked to the political as well). The matter has been more difficult than most of us could have anticipated. Last week I sought to express some of the reasons why that might be. The objective of this was for us to be more understanding of those with whom we may disagree. Even further, my objective is that we might excel at letting **“brotherly love continue” (Hebrews 13:1)**.

Among the reasons this is difficult are:

- A lack of historical or biblical precedent.
- Immediate impact upon everyone.
- The vastness of the spectrum within orthodoxy on the best response.
- Questioning of motives.
- The varying degrees of opinion regarding the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate.
- The uniqueness of the church compared to other institutions.
- Optics-how churches are viewed by the watching world.

There are numerous other variables that make this a challenging issue, not the least of which is the difficulty of a unified, reliable source of information. One news outlet may yield entirely different data than another. And the way news works online, if you spend enough time accessing one source or opinion, you'll be algorithmed into getting more of the same. All this to say, we are in the midst of a battle to understand the issues before us and, more importantly for the sake of this message, understand each other.

I finished last time with a challenge for us to seek to imitate Christ in our enduring of suffering. We are also to imitate Christ in terms of one of the reasons He became flesh, that He might better sympathize with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15, 16). We are all faced with new and, for most of us, uncharted challenges. The enemy would have our ships colliding. We, against such an assault, should recognize that though our ships are not

all in a straight line, they are in the same tide. We should, at very least, close our gunports.

Your Forbearing Spirit

This morning I wish to push the undertaking a bit further. The Apostle Paul offers a phrase early in the fourth chapter of Philippians,

Let your forbearing *spirit* be known to all men (Philippians 4:5a).

“Forbearing” *epiekes*, for the sake of accuracy, means

Epiekes: not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom, yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant.¹

Another definition I quite liked was, ‘sweet reasonableness’.² Another definition adds, ‘To be tolerant or patient in the face of provocation.’ If one is forbearing, there must be something to forbear.

Recognizing that the epistles were generally written in response to an issue, I took a bit of time to examine why Paul would offer this particular phrase. As I pursued the context, I saw that some of the most beautiful, comforting and oft quoted passages in all of Scripture ran adjacent to the call to have a forbearing spirit.

It is in this context that we read such words as

...rejoice in the Lord always...Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus...whatever things are true...noble...just...pure...lovely...of good report...any virtue and if anything is praiseworthy-meditate on these things (Philippians 4:4-9).

¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 371). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Vine, W. E., & Bruce, F. F. (1981). [Vine's Expository dictionary of Old and New Testament words](#) (Vol. 2, p. 117). Old Tappan NJ: Revell.

Even still, why was all of this written? What was the issue. What we read as we move earlier into the chapter are these words:

I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord (Philippians 4:2).

It is an almost universally received opinion that Paul was desirous to settle a quarrel between those two women.³ We know not of what sort or quarrel and that, I have little doubt, is by design, that the offered counsel would be more universally applied. We also learn in Philippians 4:3 that these were women who excelled in Christian maturity, for there are assigned great honor when called “**co-laborers**” or “**fellow soldiers**” *synethlesan* with Paul in the gospel (Philippians 4:3).

The passage offers God’s counsel for mature Christians in conflict. Keep in mind that the issue between these two women was significant enough to reach the ear of the Apostle Paul and be addressed in Scripture!

As we seek Paul’s (truly God’s) remedy for conflict, let us take notice of a phrase used three times in the opening four verses: “**...in the Lord.**” When pondering how well we will reunite as our current challenge winds down (or transitions into something else entirely), it can hardly be said better than Calvin:

We must take notice, however, that, whenever he speaks of agreement, he adds also the bond of it – *in the Lord*. For every combination will inevitably be accursed, if apart from the Lord, and, on the other hand, nothing is so disjoined, but that it ought to be reunited in Christ.⁴

Paul seems to be assuming that if his readers are truly “in the Lord” reconciliation is always possible.

But we are not left there, as if true godly forbearance means something like *hesitatingly tolerate*. The recipe the Holy Spirit gives is thick with wisdom and beyond what we can excavate in our short time, so I will merely highlight.

³ Calvin, J., & Pringle, J. (2010). [Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians](#) (pp. 112–113). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

⁴ Calvin, J., & Pringle, J. (2010). [Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians](#) (pp. 112–113). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

It almost appears to be a forced entry into the midst of God's counsel to insert the words,

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say rejoice (Philippians 4:4).

The imprisoned, persecuted and soon-to-be-dead apostle is not merely himself joyful, but stirs other to joy in the Lord as well. Paul won't offer person-to-person counsel without, as he is wont to do, directing us to the source of our true and eternal joy, which is found in Christ alone. One might easily conclude that the providential removal of our joy in and through the world is designed to remind us from whence our true joy, and strength, actually flows.

Let your forbearing *spirit* be known to all men. The Lord is near (Philippians 4:5).

We will conclude, in a moment, by returning to how forbearance goes beyond a mere begrudging tolerance. For now, notice the final phrase, "**The Lord is near.**" He is not likely talking about the Second Coming or even the fall of Jerusalem here. He is probably appealing to Psalm 145:18 where we learn,

The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth (Psalm 145:18).

In our conflicts we to be ever reminded that it is God who ultimately sorts things out. We may prepare for battle, but the victory is the Lord's (Proverbs 21:31). There are ways I/we would like to things pan out, but we are building on shaky ground, and find reconciliation fleeting, unless we defer to the invisible, yet mighty, hand of God. We would be fools not to prefer it.

This is followed by one of my favorite commands in Scripture, to

Be anxious for nothing (Philippians 4:6a)

Needless to say, it is difficult to be forbearing on the outside if we are anxious on the inside. Prior to this wonderful command is an appeal to the providence of God. On the other side of this command lies another command.

...but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6b).

The bookends of trusting in the providence of God and the beseeching of God with a thankful heart is the recipe for equanimity.

Cast your burden on the Lord, And He shall sustain you; He shall never permit the righteous to be moved (Psalm 55:22).

As we move through the passage seeking to resolve a conflict between two women, we begin to see that the solution to the problem is much greater and glorious than the problem seems to warrant. It's as if we need money for lunch and God forks over the riches of Solomon! The following promise is not only something we would desire for ourselves, but would hope for in the person with whom we have conflict.

...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

If this is at all happening, even in one person, let alone both or all, the conflict starts for the exits. Harping, I hope doesn't sound too strong, is Paul's persistence when he reminds us that it is the peace of God which guards our hearts and minds, not peace with men. Peace with men is dependent upon peace with God.

Verse 8, in my estimation, provides a list of objects of meditation. And though it would appear that this list can, and should, apply to all of

life, it should at least include (the context being the resolving of a conflict) attributes of the (in this case) sister with whom you have the conflict.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8).

A heavenly forbearance goes well beyond hesitatingly or begrudgingly tolerating. It moves into the realm of appreciating, admiring, rejoicing.

I am sometimes invited to preach at churches (true Christian churches) where I feel, even believe, the music portion of worship is a bit off or the liturgy is lacking. I recall standing there, indignant. "Such an immature and lacking service" I would think to myself. That terrible attitude was wrong on so many levels. Did I think that God was so impressed with our excellent singing and liturgy that He could take a break from His hard work in that church and just come and enjoy our church? Did I think I was the mature one when I, instead of singing with the congregation, couldn't overcome my own haughty spirit? With whom was God pleased on those mornings? Certainly not me!

Don't get me wrong, I still objectively think some worship and liturgies could be better. If called upon (which I sometimes am) I would advise they add a call to worship or a benediction or more routinely celebrate the Lord's Supper. I still think that, at some level, I am right. But my attitude and puffed-up spirit was (and still often is) in desperate need of humbling.

Can we find, in the person with whom we have conflict, attributes that are worthy of praise? When I first saw the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, neither I, nor my Christian friends were Sabbatarian. But we loved the movie. We admired Eric Liddell's conviction and lack of willingness to cave to the Prince of Wales because of his Christian, (albeit in our minds at the time) misguided convictions.

I recently observed a baptism in Russia where they cut a hole in the ice so they could fully submerge the person being baptized. I am not one who holds that full submersion is necessary in that sacrament. But I

couldn't help admiring the price they were willing to pay to hold to what they believed the Scriptures to teach.

It is difficult for me to think of an entertainer growing up who I disagreed with more than Joan Baez. I thought her convictions were completely off the rails. But I couldn't help admiring her willingness to dedicate her time, talent, energy and finances to the things she believed in. She was even willing to enter a warzone where she was subject to bombing for days. If I ever met her, I would probably open our conversation by expressing my admiration for her courage and efforts prior to seeking to change her mind.

You might think that I go too far! Don't get me wrong. I believe we are to disciple the nations and teach those disciples to obey all that Scripture teaches (Matthew 28:18-20). But even Jesus, in His parables, isolated a commendable attribute of an otherwise dishonest person. In the Parable of the Unjust Servant Jesus isn't advocating the cooking of the books by a servant looking out for his own best interests. But the servant is commended for his "shrewdness/wisdom" in thinking ahead.

Can we not, in our current season, find attributes worthy of praise even in those with whom we disagree? At the risk of sounding self-aggrandizing, I am not, when it comes to the spectrum of responses to Covid, one who livestreams or isolates. But I recognize how difficult and psychologically and emotionally taxing that is. I feel for those who hold that conviction and (similar to how I admired Eric Liddell-who, by the way I know theologically agree with) admire them for seeking to keep it.

Not a Sunday goes by when I fail to think that today may be the day I am arrested and fined for my conviction to continue to meet the way we do. Some people have expressed gratitude for my/our willingness to hold to our convictions to meet in person all these months. Some may think that my convictions are misguided. I don't mind hearing those opinions and hopefully am open to instruction.

But what I am hoping we all resist, is giving in to frustration, anger and contempt for one another. The Scriptures speak of three enemies of the church and of the members of the church: the world, the flesh and the devil. The world is offering us Covid. Our flesh is offering us weakness, fatigue and carnality. The devil would use this to divide and, if possible, decimate. He cannot help but be giddy at the prospect of dividing the people of God without heresy or even gross immorality. He rejoices that

people who have ever loved one another and loved their church (whatever Christian church of which you may be a member), will be torn asunder without a bullet, without a torch, without a strap or a burning stake.

God has put the beauty of the settings upon the table and has called us, in Christ, to access them. It is a fight. And we are to **“fight the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12).**

Questions for Study

1. Is verse by verse preaching preferable? Why or why not? Are there times when a topical sermon is appropriate? Explain (pages 2, 3).
2. What can suffering produce? Has this ever happened with you? How (pages 3, 4)?
3. Why do you suppose the Covid issue is so difficult for Christians and the church (page 3)?
4. What does it mean to forbear (page 4)?
5. What had happened that led Paul to write the fourth chapter of Philippians (pages 4, 5)?
6. Why does Paul use the phrase “in the Lord” so often in this passage (pages 5, 6)?
7. How are we advised to avoid being anxious (pages 6, 7)?
8. Explain how forbearance is more than merely tolerating (pages 7, 8).
9. Think of ways you can encourage and admire those with whom you disagree (pages 8, 9).

