

Philippians 4:1-13
October 9, '11

“WHATEVER”

IS THERE A MORE INFURIATING WORD THAT CHILDREN OR TEEN-AGERS CAN SAY TO A PARENT THAN THE WORD, “WHATEVER?”

IT’S USUALLY UTTERED WITH BELLIGERENCE & A TONE OF DISMISSAL.

IT CONVEYS SO MUCH NEGATIVE EMOTION IN A SINGLE WORD.

IN CONTEMPTUOUSLY SPEWING FORTH THEIR “WHATEVER,” THAT CHILD OR TEEN-AGER IS SAYING, “*I HEAR WHAT YOU’RE SAYING & I KNOW YOU EXPECT ME TO AGREE WITH YOU, BUT I DON’T. I KNOW I HAVE TO FOLLOW YOUR RULES & MAYBE I WILL & MAYBE I WON’T. BUT EITHER WAY, I DON’T LIKE IT!*”

IT REALLY IS AMAZING, ISN’T IT, HOW A SINGLE WORD CAN CONVEY SO MUCH!

THE ONLY THING MORE INFURIATING THAN CHILDREN & TEEN-AGERS PULLING THE “WHATEVER” CARD IS WHEN ADULTS DO IT!

AND THEY DO, DON’T THEY?

AND *THEN* YOU RESIST BEING INFURIATED BY IT BECAUSE IT MAKES YOU SOUND JUST AS CHILDISH IN YOUR INFURIATION AS THEY ARE IN THEIR “WHATEVER!”

YES, IT’S ASTOUNDING HOW A SINGLE WORD CAN BE SO LOADED WITH MEANING & EMOTION – ESPECIALLY A WORD SO SEEMINGLY INNOCUOUS AS “WHATEVER.”

WHAT’S EVEN MORE ASTOUNDING, THOUGH, IS HOW A WORD THAT CAN BE SO INFURIATING CAN BE EQUALLY UPLIFTING WHEN IT IS USED AS PAUL USES IT HERE IN THIS PASSAGE.

THESE 13 VERSES ARE VIRTUALLY UNPARALLELED IN THEIR ENTHUSIASM, EXCITEMENT & EXHUBERANCE.

PAUL TAKES US TO THE LOFTIEST OF PLACES AS HE WRITES THESE WORDS.

WE FIND THIS SAME TONE THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS.

IT’S NO WONDER THAT THIS LITTLE BOOK IS OFTEN LISTED AS THE FAVORITE BOOK OF THE ENTIRE BIBLE FOR MANY PASTORS.

PAUL HAD SUCH A WARM & LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH THESE PEOPLE – A RELATIONSHIP THAT EVERY PASTOR LONGS FOR WITH HIS OR HER PEOPLE.

BUT, EVEN THOUGH THESE WORDS TAKE US TO LOFTY PLACES, THEY DON’T START THAT WAY, DO THEY?

PAUL BEGINS THIS FOURTH & FINAL CHAPTER BY MAKING REFERENCE TO A FIGHT WITHIN THE CHURCH.

YOU CAN CALL IT A SQUABBLE OR A SPAT, A DISAGREEMENT OR AN ARGUMENT, BUT IT’S REALLY JUST AN OLD-FASHIONED CHURCH FIGHT BETWEEN TWO MEMBERS.

NOW, IT HAS TO HAVE BEEN MORE THAN A SLIGHT DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN THESE 2 WOMEN FOR IT TO HAVE MADE IT ALL THE WAY TO PAUL & FOR HIM TO HAVE SEEN FIT TO ADDRESS IT IN THIS LETTER.

IT’S INTERESTING & IT’S TRAGIC TO THINK THAT THIS IS ALL WE KNOW ABOUT THESE 2 WOMEN.

THEY WERE OBVIOUSLY LEADERS WITHIN THE CHURCH AND PAUL CLEARLY HAD GREAT AFFECTION FOR BOTH OF THEM.

AND YET ALL HISTORY HAS LEFT US ABOUT THEM IS THAT THEY WERE FIGHTING ONE ANOTHER.

THERE IS, PERHAPS, A LESSON FOR US IN THIS.

ARE THE FIGHTS IN WHICH WE ARE ENGAGED, REALLY WORTH THAT BEING OUR LEGACY – THE ONE THING WE LEAVE BEHIND – THE THING BY WHICH OTHERS WILL REMEMBER US?

GRANTED, THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT *ARE* WORTH FIGHTING FOR, BUT REALISTICALLY, SUCH FIGHTS ARE VERY, VERY FEW IN THE LIFE OF ANY ONE OF US.

I THINK IT'S INTERESTING – AND WORTH NOTING – THAT AFTER PAUL HAS ADDRESSED THE ISSUE BETWEEN EUODIA & SYNTYCHE AND AFTER HE HAS URGED THEM TO PUT AN END TO THEIR BICKERING – IT IS THEN THAT HE TAKES US TO THOSE LOFTY PLACES.

HE ENCOURAGES THE PEOPLE TO DEVELOP AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE IN ALL THINGS & TO FOCUS THEIR THOUGHTS & THEIR HEARTS & THEIR DEEDS ON POSITIVE & UPLIFTING THINGS – TO LOOK AT THE WORLD & BE THANKFUL FOR WHAT WE FIND.

WHAT A STARK CONTRAST THIS IS TO WHAT WE FIND TAKING PLACE BETWEEN THE TWO SPATTING CHURCH MEMBERS.

I THINK IT PUTS THEIR DISAGREEMENT INTO PERSPECTIVE, DOESN'T IT?

“IS WHAT YOU'RE FIGHTING ABOUT REALLY ALL THAT IMPORTANT IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS? CAN'T YOU SIMPLY FOCUS YOUR THOUGHTS & YOUR ENERGIES ON THAT WHICH WILL BUILD THE CHURCH RATHER THAN TEAR IT DOWN?”

AND ISN'T THERE ALSO A STARK CONTRAST IN OUR OWN ATTITUDE TOWARD THOSE WHO ARE LIKE EUODIA & SYNTYCHE AND THOSE WHO ARE LIKE THE PERSON PAUL IS CHALLENGING US TO BE?

PUT SIMPLY, WHO WOULD YOU RATHER HANG OUT WITH – THE PERSON WHO'S LOOKING FOR A FIGHT OR THE PERSON WHOSE MIND & HEART & WORDS ARE FILLED WITH THINGS THAT ARE UPLIFTING & HOPEFUL?

YOU KNOW BOTH KINDS OF PEOPLE, DON'T YOU?

YOU PROBABLY KNOW THE *EXTREMES* OF BOTH KINDS AS WELL, DON'T YOU?

HAVE YOU EVER KNOWN SOMEONE WHO MADE YOU FEEL AS THOUGH YOU WERE IN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL?

I HAVE.

I HAVE A CONSCIOUS RECOLLECTION OF THREE SEPARATE TIMES IN MY LIFE WHEN I HAVE BEEN MADE TO FEEL AS THOUGH I WAS IN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL.

I'M NOT SAYING THAT I WAS – I COULD HAVE BEEN WRONG.

I'M ALSO NOT SAYING THAT THOSE *PEOPLE* WERE EVIL.

I'M JUST SAYING THAT ON THREE DISTINCT OCCASIONS – OCCASIONS THAT ARE VERY MEMORABLE TO ME TO THIS VERY DAY – I HAVE FELT AS THOUGH I WAS IN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL.

NOW, I'M NOT – IN ANY WAY – SUGGESTING THAT EUODIA & SYNTYCHE – WERE EVIL.

THEY WEREN'T.

THEY WERE, IN FACT, GOOD PEOPLE – LEADERS WITHIN THE CHURCH.

BUT GUESS WHAT.

SO WERE THE PEOPLE THAT ME FEEL AS THOUGH I WAS IN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL.

ON ALL THREE OCCASIONS, THE PEOPLE WHO MADE ME FEEL THAT WAY WERE CHURCH PEOPLE.

DON'T GO LOOKING AROUND YOU – BECAUSE YOU WON'T SEE THEM HERE – NOR WILL YOU *EVER* SEE THEM HERE.

IT'S FRIGHTENING, THOUGH, ISN'T IT, TO THINK THAT A GOOD CHURCH PERSON CAN MAKE SOMEONE FEEL THAT WAY.

I HAVE TO TELL YOU – ON ALL THREE OCCASIONS, I WANTED TO GO HOME, GET OUT OF WHAT I WAS WEARING & TAKE A SHOWER.

SOME OF YOU MAY UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT.

HOW TRAGIC IT IS THAT SOMEONE WHO IS OTHERWISE A GOOD PERSON & SEEKS TO LEAD A GOOD LIFE AS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST CAN ALLOW THEMSELVES TO BE SO CAUGHT UP IN NEGATIVE & VINDICTIVE THINKING THAT THEY LEAVE OTHERS FEELING AS THOUGH THEY ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF EVIL.

NOW – LIKE I SAID – THAT'S AN EXTREME EXPERIENCE & YET HOW OFTEN DO ALL OF US – ON OCCASION, MAKE PEOPLE FEEL AS THOUGH THEY DON'T WANT TO BE AROUND US BECAUSE OUR THOUGHTS & OUR WORDS AREN'T FOCUSED ON THINGS THAT ARE UPLIFTING & POSITIVE?

BUT THERE'S THE OTHER SIDE, ISN'T THERE.

THERE ARE THOSE PEOPLE THAT WE ENCOUNTER WHO JUST MAKE US HAPPY TO BE NEAR THEM.

THERE ARE THOSE PEOPLE WHO PERSONIFY THE WORDS WE SEE ON THE COVER OF OUR BULLETIN THIS MORNING – PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES ARE TRUE, HONORABLE, PURE, PLEASING & COMMENDABLE.

IT'S CLEAR THAT THEY CONSISTENTLY THINK ON THESE THINGS & LIVE THEIR LIVES ACCORDINGLY.

WOULDN'T YOU LOVE TO BE THE KIND OF PERSON WHO COMES TO SOMEONE ELSE'S MIND WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT PEOPLE IN THEIR OWN LIVES WHO ARE LIKE THAT?

IT ISN'T EASY, THOUGH, IS IT?

IT IS PERHAPS HARDER TODAY THAN IT HAS EVER BEEN TO DO WHAT PAUL ASKS OF US – TO KEEP OUR MINDS & HEARTS FOCUSED ON POSITIVE THINGS.

WE SEE SO MUCH TURMOIL ALL AROUND US – WE SEE TROUBLES WITH OUR ECONOMY & STRIFE OF ONE SORT OR ANOTHER ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

IT'S HARD TO KEEP OUR MINDS FOCUSED ON THINGS THAT ARE TRUE & HONORABLE & JUST & PURE & PLEASING & COMMENDABLE.

BUT THAT'S PRECISELY WHY WE MUST DO SO – BECAUSE THE WORLD LONGS FOR IT.

THE WORLD YEARNs FOR THOSE WHO BRING JOY & HOPE & HAPPINESS INTO LIFE WHEN FEAR, DESPAIR & STRESS ARE SO PREVALENT.

BUT I KNOW THERE ARE THOSE WHO WILL SAY – “IT’S GOING TO HAVE TO BE SOMEONE ELSE BECAUSE I’M ONE OF THOSE CAPTIVATED BY FEAR, DESPAIR & STRESS & IF OTHER PEOPLE HAD TO ENDURE WHAT I ENDURE, THEY’D BE THE SAME WAY.”

TO THOSE WHO SUGGEST SUCH A THING, I DRAW YOUR ATTENTION AGAIN TO PAUL & THIS PASSAGE.

HE USES THAT LOADED WORD “WHATEVER” IN THE FIRST PART OF THE PASSAGE WHEN HE STRINGS OFF THE LIST OF THINGS ON WHICH WE SHOULD SET OUR MINDS.

BUT HE USES IT AGAIN NEAR THE END OF THE PASSAGE IN AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT CONTEXT.

HE SAYS, “...I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.”

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO THINK YOU’VE GOT IT ROUGH, YOU’VE GOT NOTHING ON PAUL.

NO ONE ENDURED MORE THAN PAUL SO THAT EXCUSE JUST WON’T WORK.

PAUL HAD LEARNED THE SECRET OF LIVING IN THE ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY OF THE LOVE OF GOD FROM WHICH NOTHING COULD SEPARATE HIM.

HE HAD LEARNED TO BE CONTENT REGARDLESS OF HIS CIRCUMSTANCES.

HE HAD LEARNED THAT HE COULD, IN FACT, SET HIS MIND ON THINGS THAT ARE TRUE & HONORABLE & JUST & PURE & PLEASING & COMMENDABLE.

MAY YOU STRIVE TO BE THE KIND OF PERSON WHO LIVES IN SUCH A WAY THAT OTHERS LONG TO SIMPLY BE IN YOUR PRESENCE BECAUSE THEY KNOW THAT, IN YOUR PRESENCE, THEY FEEL THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST AND HIS LOVE IN THEIR VERY MIDST. AMEN.

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