



ADVENT WEEK FOUR: PEACE

Norman Vincent Peale, who was actually a pastor decades ago, wrote the book “the power of positive thinking”. In it, he had quotes like:

"Avoid argument, but whenever a negative attitude is expressed, counter with a positive and optimistic opinion."

"A man who is self-reliant, positive, optimistic, and undertakes his work with the assurance of success magnetizes his condition. He draws to himself the creative powers of the universe."

"If your eyes are looking down in the mud and you feel a sense of failure, you will create defeat for yourself. Optimistic visualization combined with prayer and faith will inevitably actualise achievement."

"It is indeed a fact that the man who thinks with positive self-reliance and optimism does magnetize his condition and releases power to attain his goal. So expect the best at all times."¹

¹ <https://www.centreforoptimism.com/normanvincentpeale>

I was taught things like this while growing up agnostic and surrounded by a culture that promoted optimism and positivity. There was one basic underlying rule- it was “don’t bum other people out”, and an equal one along with it, “don’t be bummed out yourself!”

But come on Norman... Get real.

"Avoid argument, but whenever a negative attitude is expressed, counter with a positive and optimistic opinion?" Really? Well, what about when someone believes something that is seriously wrong and destructive to them, and they won't hear you out? Isn't there a place for "arguing" with someone for their good, while speaking the truth in love? And what about when someone is "being negative", because they are hurt, lamenting, struggling, and sad? Isn't answering someone who is in pain with blind positivity reminiscent of Prov. 25:20, that states "Singing songs to a troubled heart is like taking off clothing on a cold day or like pouring vinegar on soda?" I've seen often enough that when someone is in a really tough place, just being present with them, listening, and feeling their pain with them is actually more helpful than pouring the vinegar of positivity on their "negative" soda!

"A person who is self-reliant, positive, optimistic, and undertakes their work with the assurance of success magnetizes their condition. They draw to themselves the creative powers of the universe?" So if I'm just reliant on myself, not God, always positive, always optimistic, and undertake my work believing that I'll succeed then will that always happen? And apparently will I also, pastor Norman, who tells me to rely on myself, then "draw to myself the creative powers of the universe"? Didn't Jesus come for the down and out, the broken, and the hurting? How does my "self-actualization" help those who are hurting? And what about when it doesn't work? Isn't it possible that I could "believe" that I'm going to make it and then totally not make it?

"If your eyes are looking down in the mud and you feel a sense of failure, you will create defeat for yourself. Optimistic visualization combined with prayer and faith will inevitably actualize achievement?" So, what about those honest moments where I genuinely feel down, in the dumps, and like I've messed up? Does that mean I'm always sinning when I feel that way? Is Psalm 34:18 not true, that says; "The Lord is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit?" Isn't it more important to seek the face and heart of God than to seek "success"?

"It is indeed a fact that the person who thinks with positive self-reliance and optimism does magnetize their condition and releases power to attain their goal. So expect the best at all times?" What about when things are tough? Isn't that a part of life Norman?

I think I like what Philippians 4 has to tell us about positivity much better than what Norman Vincent Peale says.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5 Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:4-7)

Paul isn't telling us to keep lying to ourselves and saying that everything is wonderful, and we're always going to succeed, and life is so beautiful and great. But Paul is teaching us what true, not fake, peace is.

We've been talking about hope, love, and joy in this advent season. Christmas Eve, December 24th, 2023, is the week where we focus on peace. So we're digging into this passage to learn about the Lord's peace.

Paul teaches us about the true peace of Christ in this passage. He says to "rejoice in the Lord always", and he says it again for emphasis to remind us, "rejoice!". Is Paul giving some empty shout out to call us into blind optimism and constant positivity? Or is he talking about some deeper kind of inner "rejoicing" that relates to the joy we talked about during the last week of advent? Let's dig into the passage and find out!

Verses 4 - 7 contain four admonitions ("rejoice," "let your gentleness be evident," "do not be anxious," and "present your requests to God")²

The term "gentleness" (epieikes) or "graciousness" was often used for an attitude of kindness where the normal or expected response was retaliation.³

Once, about twenty one years ago, I was at a family member's house on Christmas Day. We had finished giving presents to each other. It was certainly a White Christmas, a cold day thick with about a foot of brand new snow on the ground. That person left their coat on a chair while they were inside. They were going to go outside and quickly grabbed their coat, and a bag of weed fell out of their coat.

This was a person who had said they had stopped smoking weed on numerous occasions to me, because they knew that I previously had an addiction to it and had stopped using it a year and a half before this, and didn't want to make me stumble. I

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picked up the bag of weed and asked the person, “yo- what’s up with this? I thought you said you quit!” The person was embarrassed and cussed me out, telling me to drag my religious @\$ outside and shovel the \$%^#*&^ driveway.

I was brand new in my faith. I had been following Jesus for about nine months at this point. The week before this if someone would have said this to me I would have cussed them back out while simultaneously trying to convert them to the faith.

But I must have been reading a section in the scripture like Phil. 4, to “let my graciousness be known to everyone”. I must have been reading what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount about loving enemies. Because something just came over me at this moment. And instead of this person getting the side of Ben that Jesus was so desperately trying to work on, they surprisingly got the Holy Spirit.

I gently, graciously replied, “Ok...” The person looked at me with shock and some tears in their eyes. I put my coat, gloves, and hat on, and quietly went outside, grabbed a shovel, with tears rolling out of my eyes, and did the best job I could to shovel the driveway to perfection, and truth be told I was swearing under my breath at times.

People should see the graciousness of Christ in us instead of having to deal with us. I’ll admit firsthand that plenty of people in my life get a pretty steady combination of both my junk and the graciousness of Jesus. I’m simply praying for more of Jesus and less of me. How about you? And how do we get more of Jesus and less of us?

The words “be anxious” (merimnao, 4:6) or “worry” can refer to being unduly concerned about anything, but it is often used in contexts where persecution is the issue. Thus both Matthew and Luke use this word in their record of Jesus’ admonition to his disciples not to be concerned about what they will say before the local councils, governors, and kings who hunt them down because of their commitment to the gospel (Matt. 10:19; Luke 12:11).⁴

Is the Word of God just flat out telling us here to “not worry”? I don’t know about you, but I’ve been following Jesus for twenty two years, and I feel like there is a lot more to worry about in my life now than there was before. I worry about my kids health, my own health, my kids walk with Jesus, being a good husband, making enough money to pay bills and have a little fun with the family during a massive inflation in the cost of everything! I worry about our new cat “Tiger Gary” who used to live on the streets and in a neglectful home peeing all over the floor, my role as a pastor, all the people that God has put in this community and all their needs, the fact that our Church is now

⁴ NIV Application Commentary Copyright © 1995 by Frank Thielman.

independent and we need to make sure to survive, thrive and hopefully flourish in a tough neighborhood to be a Church in. You think I don't worry? You think I don't wake up in the middle of the night unable to sleep? PLEEEEEEEASE y'all! ;) We all worry. Or we say we don't worry and we're either lying, in denial, or being like way too many people in our culture and buying into Norman Vincent Peale's pile of bull crap blind positive thinking.

But, while stating "don't worry about anything", Paul was really writing to God's people the concept that songwriter Rich Mullins would so beautifully illustrate years later in 1989;

*There's bound to come some trouble to your life
But that ain't nothing to be afraid of
There's bound to come some trouble to your life
But that ain't no reason to fear
I know there's bound to come some trouble to your life
But reach out to Jesus, hold on tight
He's been there before and He knows what it's like
You'll find He's there*

*There's bound to come some tears up in your eyes
That ain't nothing to be ashamed of
I know there's bound to come some tears up in your eyes
That ain't no reason to fear
I know there's bound to come some tears up in your eyes
Reach out to Jesus, hold on tight
He's been there before and He knows what it's like
You'll find He's there*

*Now, people say maybe things will get better
People say maybe it won't be long
And people say maybe you'll wake up tomorrow
And it'll all be gone
Well I only know that maybes just ain't enough
When you need something to hold on
There's only one thing that's clear*

*I know there's bound to come some trouble to your life
But that ain't nothing to be afraid of
I know there's bound to come some tears up in your eyes*

*That ain't no reason to fear
I know there's bound to come some trouble to your life
Reach out to Jesus, hold on tight
He's been there before and He knows what it's like
You'll find He's there⁵*

Cause there is bound to come some trouble to our lives y'all! It happens to everyone! But we don't gotta be afraid! There's bound to come some tears up in our eyes, but we can reach out to Jesus and hold on tight! Wanna know why? Jesus has been there before and He knows what it's like, and He is THERE for us RIGHT NOW.

Blind positivity ain't gonna save us. Jesus saves us. Jesus went through all the darkest, roughest, toughest, and nastiest things we could imagine, and all for our sakes. Paul was writing Philippians 4 to a Church body who was getting persecuted, marginalized, ostracized, and killed for their faith. He was telling them, "don't worry- hold onto Jesus!" He was saying, "In everything, through prayer and petition, present your requests to God". He was reminding us- when things get rowdy, don't wait until things fall apart, or we blow our lids, or we make big mistakes to finally throw a hail mary prayer pass hoping that God will hear. He was saying, "in **everything** we **need** to pray!"

And what will happen if we rejoice in the Lord always, allow the graciousness of Christ to shine on everyone, even our enemies, and instead of falling into a vortex of worry, present all our thoughts and concerns to God? Well, "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Does that mean we're gonna "feel good" all the time? **No**. It means just what it says! The peace of God, beyond anything we **get** in this life, will **guard** our hearts and minds in the bosom of the Savior, Christ Jesus, who wildly loves us and has secured a place for us in eternity!

And I love what the word "guard" really means in the original language here. Do you know about it? The term "guard" (phroureo) likewise was a figure drawn from the arena of conflict and was frequently used to refer to the action of a military garrison stationed inside a city (Judith 3:6; cf. 2 Cor. 11:32).⁶

So the Word of God literally says that if we rejoice in Him, if we shower His love on everyone, even our enemies, and if we present everything to Him constantly in prayer, the Lord will guard our eternal soul and spirit like a military garrison stationed inside a city.

⁵ Listen to "Bound to Come Some Trouble" here: <https://youtu.be/7rv-D5tsAsA?si=0UIMaZB4NERV0wGS>

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I don't think y'all heard what I said just now.

Do you know what a military garrison is?

A garrison most often refers to a military outpost where troops are stationed to provide protection to an area. The word garrison is also used to refer to the troops stationed there.⁷



Fortified garrisons will be loaded with fighter planes, helicopters, tanks, and weapons. And not only that, but will have a whole load of highly trained soldiers ready for combat and defense at any time.

Let me make it plain here.

I play this little app game on my iphone for about fifteen minutes every night after I play guitar and sing to my youngest daughter Madi, just to give her some time to fall asleep while I'm there and not be scared and alone in the dark. The game is called "survivor.io". In the game, you're this little warrior who roams around, gathering gemstones, and killing zombies around you with the weapons you have. There are numerous weapons you can get in each level you play. You start with a sword, and then gradually can add on a differing variety as you gather more gems. The more weapons you gather, the more you have a bunch of zombies coming at you, and the stronger the zombies get.

⁷ <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/garrison>

There are times when you play this game, and you can't get weapons fast and strong enough to take down the onslaught of zombies constantly coming at you. Then you end up dying and having to start over.

But there are times (Oh Lord Jesus have mercy), when you all of a sudden got a full powered force field around you, you're launching rockets, you're using a high powered sword blade, you're shooting missiles, you're throwing molotov cocktails, and you're setting off landmines, and you are DOMINATING these zombies! They just can't get at you!

Let me tell you something right now! Rejoice in Jesus! Shower His love on everyone, even your enemies! Present everything to Him constantly in prayer! And the enemy will come thrusting at you with a legion of his zombie demons, and the military garrison of angels holed up in supernatural tanks, fighter planes, helicopters, and battleships will fight for you with the rockets, missiles, molotov cocktails, landmines, and sabres of the Holy Spirit!

10 Be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. 11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens. 13 For this reason take up the full armor of God, so that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having prepared everything, to take your stand. 14 Stand, therefore, with truth like a belt around your waist, righteousness like armor on your chest, 15 and your feet sandaled with readiness for the gospel of peace. 16 In every situation take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit—which is the word of God. 18 Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints. (Eph. 6:10-18)

Jesus Christ will fight your war for you! Jesus Christ will fight your battle for you! Jesus Christ lived a sinless life to battle your sin! Jesus Christ was brutalized to death so He could carry you through your trials! Jesus Christ died and was buried to take on hell, sin and death head on! Jesus Christ rose from the grave so that He would breathe the hope of the resurrection into your life and your soul! Jesus ascended to the Father to sit at the right hand of God and sent the Holy Spirit down to live in you to remind you constantly of all of these things! **Rejoice** in Him! **Let** Him Shine through you! **Lean** into Him! **Trust** Him! **Speak to Him today** about everything you're going through! He listens! He cares! He loves you! He's crazy wild about you!

Let His peace dwell in your hearts like a military garrison around your heart, your soul, your body, and your very life today. Merry Christmas y'all!