

PRACTICING JOY AND HUMILITY

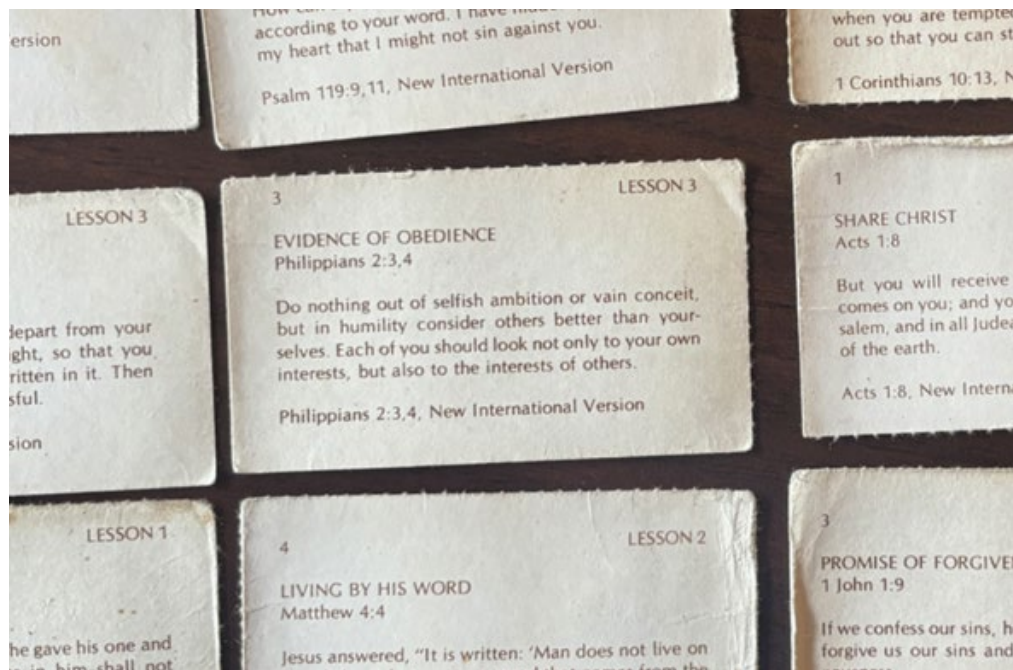
PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Sunday, April 19, 2026

“Practicing Joy and Humility” | Philippians 2:1-11 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

I spent my first year of college at Bucknell University in central Pennsylvania, and during that time, I began exploring Christian faith on my own. I went to a Christian fellowship group, where I was given 16 little cards, each with a Bible verse. Those cards stayed in my wallet for a long time, and they’re in my desk to this day.



The card that probably made the most impact on me was Philippians 2:3-4.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit,
but in humility consider others better than yourself.
Each of you should look not only to your own interests
But also to the interest of others.

I knew from early in my Christian journey that humility was a big part of being a Christian and following Jesus. And when I opened my Bible and kept reading, I saw that the next verse encourages us to “take on the mind of Christ” or to be more Christ-like.

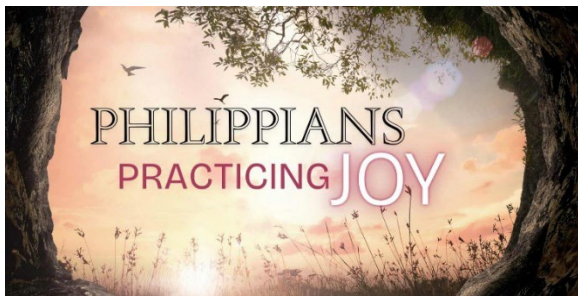
I think the reason that verse about humility stayed with me is because I saw Christ-like humility in action. One or two Sundays mornings a month, our Christian fellowship group journeyed to the Lewisburg Federal

Penitentiary, which at that time was one of five maximum-security prisons in the country.

We joined the inmates for worship, and to this day when I hear “How Great Thou Art” I think of those services. I was glad to be part of this ministry, despite the fact that it meant we had to meet at 8am on Sunday mornings.

One Sunday that fall, I got to the meeting spot, and only one person was there—one of the group leaders, named Doug. We usually had about 5-10 people, so I asked Doug, “where is everyone?” He said, “It’s daylight savings time, so we’re an hour early.” Embarrassed, I said “Ooops, so I guess you forgot too?” He replied with a shrug and a laugh, “No I just came early in case someone else forgot.”

I might have forgotten about “falling back” that year, but I have never forgotten Doug’s gracious, humble, and kind act, which helped me feel welcomed and valued. Over the course of that year, Doug was a fine example for me of Christian humility and Christian goodness, and as I learned later, he was one of many gay Christians I’ve been blessed to know on my journey who have reflected Christ’s love.



During this Easter season, we are **reading Philipians**, which focuses on joy, and our theme is “Practicing Joy.” Today’s reading comes from chapter 2.

Last week, we looked at chapter one, where we learned that Paul wrote the letter from prison, and despite that reality, he was able to be joyful and encourage others to be joyful.

I invited you to prayerfully say the joyful intention of Psalm 118:24.

“This is the day the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Moving into chapter two today, in the first five verses, we learn that Paul **practiced joy** by trying to “take on the mind of Christ” with a spirit of humility and a focus on other people. And he said it would bring joy to see others doing the same.

And in verses 6 to 11, we hear the “Christ hymn”—a reflection on the death and resurrection of Jesus which is thought to be a song from the very early church. The song reflects the sacrificial self-emptying love of Jesus. Listen for God’s word.

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.
⁹ Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name that is above every other name,
¹⁰ so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” says Paul.

While joy is the central theme of Philippians, the word **mind** appears about 15 times in the little letter, depending on your English translation.

Paul wants people to take on the mind of Christ, to think in a new way to think about other people, to care for other people, to listen to other people, to be humble before other people.

With his words and his example, Paul, writing from prison, is teaching how important it is to set our minds beyond ourselves, to find meaning and purpose in life, which leads to joy.

Viktor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor who became a psychiatrist. He is best known for his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he argued that the key to surviving in a concentration camp was thinking beyond oneself and having a sense of purpose. He wrote:

There is much wisdom in the words of Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” I can see in these words a motto which holds true for any psychotherapy. In the Nazi concentration camps, one could have witnessed that those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive.

In Philippians, Paul gives us an example of this purposeful living. Rather than giving into despair, he found his “why,” cultivating a spirit of hope and joy, and encouraging others to do the same.

Remember, Jesus began his ministry by essentially calling people to be mindful, and to think in a new way and to find their “why.”

In Mark 1 Jesus proclaims the new kingdom and calls people to repent.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Then he calls them to find new purpose:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

The word repent comes from the Greek word metanoia, which literally means to think anew.

Jesus came to earth with the message that a new thing was coming in God's kingdom, God's reign, and in response he called people to "repent" and live with new purpose.

John Calvin believed repentance:

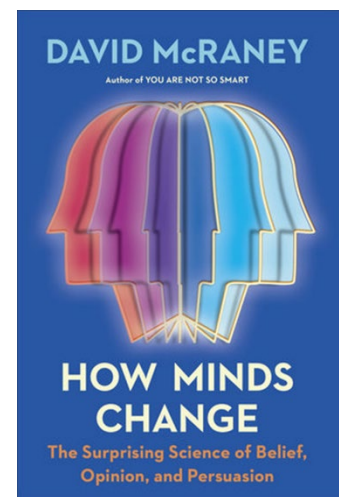
- (a) involves "withdrawing from ourselves", (b) turning to God, (c) "laying aside the old", and (d) putting on "a new mind"

So, Jesus calls us to change our minds and find new purpose.

The reality is that most of us resist change, and most of us resist changing our minds even more. Interestingly many of us want to change *other* people's minds.

That's the topic of *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion, and Persuasion* by David McRaney. It was the UW Madison "Go Big Read" book a few years ago.

One of the takeaways from the book is that it's really hard to change people's minds, and that arguing with facts alone is not usually successful.



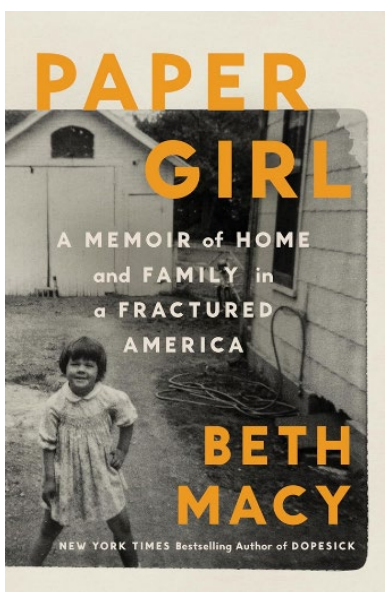
Instead, the author argues that minds change through relationships and conversations and mutual respect. He wrote a process called deep canvassing, where trained workers have extended conversations with people asking them about their values. With good questions and good listening, sometimes people's minds change.

This process was used in efforts to boost support for gay marriage earlier this century.

A review of the book in The Guardian noted that the author makes the case of how hard it is to change someone's mind with fact, but the reviewer wrote "while you can't talk someone into changing their mind, you just might be able to **listen** them into it, and David McRaney thinks he can show you how."

This kind of humble listening and intentionality about building relationships seems vital in our world right now, and in our culture in particular. With so much division and hostility, we're not listening to each other.

Our divided country is the topic of journalist Beth Macy latest book, called *Paper Girl: A Memoir of Home and Family in a Fractured America*. You might recognize her as the author of *Dopesick*, about the opioid epidemic, which became a TV show.



In *Paper Girl*, Macy returns to her hometown of Urbana, Ohio which has been decimated by factories closing and by drug abuse. She writes with sadness about the demise of local journalism.

Unsurprisingly in an economically- and informationally-challenged context, political opinions are strident and wildly different among her high school friends and among her family.

Macy has her own opinions, but in her interviews and in efforts to reconnect with people, she tries hard to listen, and when there is disagreement, she tries to focus on the positive, recognizing that arguing about politics isn't going to change anyone's mind.

Macy's book was my Rotary book club's focus this month, and as we discussed it last week, I found myself thinking that Paul's call for people to take on the mind of Christ, to think of other people as better than they are, to live with humility toward other people seems pretty important in our world today.

How are we doing with humility and listening and taking on the mind of Christ here at Covenant?

In 2012, when I was interviewing for the Pastor/Head of Staff position here at Covenant, I wanted to find out as much as possible as I could about this congregation.

I learned that there were several retired pastors in the pews, and I learned that there were a lot of university professors and very smart people.

I thought to myself that having retired pastors, professors, and really smart people in a congregation could be a wonderful blessing, or it could be a nightmare, if those people were arrogant and bossy and insecure and annoying.

Fortunately, this congregation has a long history of cultivating people who are humble and authentic, people who earnestly are trying to be faithful Christians and in one way or another are trying to take on the mind of Christ.

We value learning, asking questions, and expanding our horizons.

We try to listen to God through the teachings of Jesus. Every year we read a gospel together; we read Matthew in January.

In the spirit of thinking about humility and listening, I want to close with a story from Erma Bombeck, a 20th century journalist and humorist. One column from a long time ago is called "Please, Listen."

She wrote about having a busy day, surrounded by people talking at her, even the taxi driver on her drive to the airport. She got to her gate and sat down, relieved to have 30 minutes to herself with her book before her flight took off. (I can relate.)

Then she heard the elderly woman sitting near her say: "I'll bet it's cold in Chicago."

Bombeck curtly replied, "It's likely."

The woman persisted: "I haven't been in Chicago for nearly three years. My son lives there, you know."

"That's nice," said Bombeck, with her eyes intent on her book.

Again the elderly woman spoke: "My husband's body is on this plane. We've been married for 53 years. I don't drive, you know, and when he died a nun drove me home from the hospital . . . The funeral director let me come to the airport with him."

And as Bombeck wrote, "I don't think I have ever detested myself more than I did at that moment. Another human being was screaming to be heard, and, in desperation, had turned to a cold stranger who was more interested in a novel than she was in the real-life drama at her elbow. She needed no advice, money, assistance, expertise, or even compassion. All she needed was someone to listen. She talked numbly and steadily until we boarded the plane, and she took her seat. As I put my things in the overhead compartment, I heard her plaintive voice say to her seat companion: 'I'll bet it's cold in Chicago.' I prayed, 'Please, God, let her listen.' "

Let us pray... Dear God, help us to take on the mind of Christ, with humility, with kindness, and with joy.

Amen.