

# Learning How to Practice Peace

by Stewart Ruch

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*We can practice our way to a life of peace through nearness prayer and purity, as taught in the Bible.*

**Duration:** 26:38

**Topics:** "Peace"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of engaging with beauty and truth in our lives. He highlights the example of Jesus Christ, who came as a servant and gave up his life for others. The speaker encourages the audience to be mindful of what they watch and engage with, as it can impact their spiritual life and create anxiety. He advises practicing purity and surrounding oneself with images of beauty that remind us of God's goodness.

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## Transcript

English author and poet, W.H. Auden, wrote a book-length poem that is, if known at all, known far better for its title than the somewhat obscure contents of the poem. The name of the poem, written 60 years ago, and yet still, I think, so germane and so engaging, was *The Age of Anxiety*. He wrote it to capture what he felt in post-World War II was an increasing sense in his own life and among those that he lived and knew and had community with that there was growing anxiety about one's own life, growing anxiety about life and society and culture.

It's a powerful phrase, *The Age of Anxiety*. And 60 years later, that phrase still resonates. It resonates in the backdrop of the absolute heartbreak of what's happened in Paris, the disturbing reality of what's happened in our own country in San Bernardino, and then all the realities that may, in light of that, seem little, yet are so vivid in each of our lives.

Mental health studies would reflect that *The Age of Anxiety* is a profound experience for us as Americans. The National Institute of Mental Health projects that nearly 18%, that's 40 million Americans, struggle with diagnosed anxiety disorder. The next diagnosable disorder is half that, 9%, for bipolar depression.

Now, that's diagnosed anxiety disorders. That doesn't get anywhere near to what would be a kind of garden variety or probably better phrased weed variety anxiety that plagues almost every single one of us at some point in some way. As a pastor, it's anxiety that I hear about over and over again that is diminishing the joy in people's lives, that is giving them a sense of smallness and challenge and difficulty, that in some ways can be so overwhelming people don't know how they're going to keep going forward.

It is like a garden weed, that kind of garden weed that I hate in my vegetable garden, that spreads not in a way that I can pull one up and then another one, but it spreads like a vine, like a tiny, leafed, extensive vine that's almost impossible to tear out with your own hands. Anxiety is like that vine in our lives, and we think we pulled it out in one place and it spreads to another place. There is an age of anxiety, a chapter of anxiety for so many of us.

There are so many reasons to love the Bible. There are so many reasons to be thankful for what we're given in the Bible. But one of the chief reasons in my own life has been that the Bible speaks in many places about the reality of anxiety, that God cares very specifically about our anxious state.

Indeed, this is why we can say with Paul, who says in Philippians chapter four, rejoice. This is the third Sunday of Advent. It's called Rejoice Sunday, because we are rejoicing that the Lord is at hand, the Lord is near, and because the Lord is at hand, because the Lord is near, we can be free from the plague of anxiety, that there are actually practices that we can engage in in our lives, spiritual practices, practical practices that we can engage in, that will lead us into the life of the God of peace, that we need not live lives ultimately marked and profoundly colored by the kind of silent terror that for so many of us is the reality of anxiety.

Paul says this. Look with me. Go ahead, you guys, to your bulletins and to your text in Philippians four.

He actually uses in verse nine the phrase, practice these things. He is specifically saying that we can practice certain things that will lead us into the presence of the life of God, who is known as the God of peace. Malcolm Gladwell could have captured what many of us know just to be true, which is, in the book *Outliers*, that practice is what's critical to becoming good at something.

He captured the popularized idea that 10,000 hours are what's needed to become an expert in something. Well, you don't need to tell, as we heard in the prelude with a phenomenal pianist, a pianist, a musician, that you need hours upon hours to become a good musician. Or a healthcare professional, you need hours and hours of not only studying medicine but applying medicine to become an excellent healthcare professional.

A basketball player knows it takes thousands and thousands and thousands of free throws to make the free throw in the moment when it counts. We practice so many things in our lives we want to be good at. If so, with free throws.

If so, say, the way in which we practice asking somebody else. Maybe, guys, you've even done a little bit of meertime. I'm just, I'm just wondering if you'd want, that's too much, that's too happy.

I'm just wondering if you'd want to, I don't know, that seems too, right? If we practice how we date and we practice how we throw basketballs, how much more should we now accept that the Christian life is a life of practicing? Practicing prayer and practicing purity for the sake of living within the life of the God of peace. If you want to live a life of peace, internalized peace, the really good news that the Bible gives us this morning is that you can practice your way to that life through prayer and through purity as seen in our text. Okay, two caveat notes on that.

All right. First caveat note, you cannot achieve peace. I need to be clear.

Paul says you can practice your way into the life of peace, who is the life of God, which is the life of God, but you can't achieve peace. Peace is actually centered in the very character of God Himself. He's

referred in this passage as the God of peace.

So we can't achieve peace, we can't succeed to peace, but we can practice our way into the life of God's peace. There's a difference there, and it's very important. Hopefully that becomes clear as I teach this morning.

Second caveat, this is also really important, is that some of you have actual anxiety disorders, diagnosed or undiagnosed. Some of you are facing, even the last week, very serious financial anxiety, health anxiety, I don't know. So for some of us, these practices will absolutely serve you, they will absolutely strengthen you.

But you might also need the practice and the gift of Christian psychology of a good Christian counselor who is studied and expert in this area of anxiety. And if you would like that help, we at Resurrection advocate that help, and we advocate working with certain counselors in our community that we've worked with ourselves, and we'd be glad and would love it. Just reach out to us here at Res, and we'll get you with somebody who can walk with you in that.

Let's look at our text. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice.

Skipping down to the second part of verse 5, the Lord is at hand. And then down there to verse 7, and the peace of God will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Okay, let's work on second part of verse 5 down to verse 7. Here we have the first practice.

It's the practice of prayer. Specifically, it's the practice of nearness prayer. It's the practice of prayer as friendship with God.

If I have to give you a three-word definition of prayer, if you forced me to it, I'd say friendship with God. That's the heart of prayer. Now when this is taught, and rightly so, often the mechanics of certain kinds of prayers is focused on, and it's good, Thanksgiving prayer.

It says with Thanksgiving, supplication or petition prayer. It's right there in the text. The mechanics are excellent, but I like to focus on the context around the mechanics this morning.

And we have a book-ended context. First of all, the Lord is at hand. It can also be translated, the Lord is near.

And then we're given sort of the image of peace personified. We're given a, we're given a simile. We're given an image that, that, that peace is like a guard.

It's like a sentry. Now a sentry or a guard always stands in a place where there's vulnerability, and they stand close to the place of vulnerability. They stand there to protect and to guard.

And we're told that the peace of God is like a guard, like a sentry, that stands near to us in our time of crisis. That stands near to us in our heart, which is our vulnerable place, the center of our person. Heart is center of our person.

So we're told that really what this is about in prayer is this nearness prayer. It's nearness to the guard of our heart. It's nearness to Jesus who is at hand.

And that's the heart of prayer. Now this makes absolute logical sense, but the best way and the most important practice that you as a Christian just need to accept and go, okay, my life is gonna be about practicing prayer for the rest of my life. I will probably do that more than almost anything else that I do, and there's other really important things that you do as a Christian.

But I'm gonna do that first. I'm gonna learn to practice a prayer, and of nearness prayer, a friendship with God. Because it's logical that if God, His very character is the God of peace, that if I am close to God, I am in peace.

So you are training yourself throughout your day in crisis or in boredom, in excitement, right? Or just in driving around, you are training yourself that the Lord is near, that you are living close to God who is God of peace. That is the practice that alleviates the anxious heart more than anything else that we could ever do. And it works.

So many can bear testimony that this practice over time works. Now it's practice. So when you're practicing free throws, sometimes you hit them, sometimes you don't.

When you practice prayer, sometimes you have a great prayer time, and sometimes you have a very mediocre prayer time. But you don't stop shooting free throws because you have a mediocre free throw practice. No, you keep practicing.

Ten thousand hours. So we see that there's this call to nearness prayer. So much of anxiety is about the future.

Can I get a witness to any college students going into finals this week? Right? I mean, you have anxiety about the paper that's due, you have anxiety about the test, what's going to be on the test, will you be ready for the test, will you know the answers to the test, how will you do on the test, how will the professor think you did on the test. There's several reasons to be anxiety about the future, and you have no idea what's going to come. You may think you know what's on the test, but sometimes professors like to trick you.

There are professors in this very church that like tricking students. We know this. So you don't know what's going to happen in the future on that exam.

You don't know. You don't know how the professor will read your paper. You don't know.

There's a future and you're anxious about it. Now that's real, but how about even more real, right? How about you truly don't know financially how you're going to make it for the next six months, and there's no relief in sight. You don't know how you're going to climb out from underneath an immense amount of debt.

You don't know how you're going to handle the isolating experience of not being in a rich relationship for one more week. You don't know what's going to happen with your health and the diagnosis that you just received. You don't know.

The future is out there, and the future is pressing, and you see the future, and you know it's coming, but you have no control over the future at all. Paul uses a very important word in here. It's a word that could pass by us if we don't understand it, and it's the word Lord.

Okay, he uses the word Lord to describe Jesus, but he's using the word Lord with a double edge, because Philippi was a city in the outskirts of the Roman Empire. They were under another Lord politically in terms of government. They were under Lord Caesar, and what Paul is trying to do in using the word Lord so specifically, and he said that the Lord is at hand, is he is saying it is so tempting when you look at the future and the fear of the future to put your hands in a secular Lord, in a state Lord.

It's so tempting to listen to a politician and believe that they know the future, that they can protect you from the future. It's so tempting to think that Caesar would protect us, and we'll put our trust in Caesar, and he will secure our future, because he's so powerful. And what Paul is saying is there is no leader that can secure your future.

There's no politician that can promise you anything about the future, because the truth is they're just as anxious about the future as you are. There's one Lord, Paul is saying, the Lord is at hand. By that he means two things.

He's at hand, he's here now, nearing his prayer, but he's near, he's at hand, he's coming again. The Lord is actually in the future. You have the promise of the resurrection.

Jesus is here right now. That's the promise of the resurrection, but you have the promise of the ascension, that Jesus has gone to the Father, and he says, I will come again. The Lord is in the future.

When you look at your future, all you need to see is the Lord. This summer I had a chance to hike some mountains in Colorado with a couple of my kids. It's a very powerful experience, and very challenging, and I consider myself pretty fit.

It was a huge challenge, and we could see the peak we wanted to get to. It was a named peak. We knew about the peak.

We studied the peak. We could see the peak, but we couldn't see the trails that got dodging. We couldn't experience the oxygen loss that we would have trying to get there.

I feel like I was pressing each leg up the hill to get to the next level, but I could always see the peak. I always knew that it was there. I knew that it wasn't going anywhere, and that's what it's like with Jesus in your future.

You can see him. You know that he's there. He's in your future.

You don't know how hard it's going to be at times. You don't know that you might get lost along the way. You don't think you'd be dry, just desperate for oxygen.

You don't know when that's going to happen and how it's going to happen, but you know he's in the future. The Lord is near. The Lord is near.

Entrust yourself to him, Paul says, not to Caesar. He's the Alpha and the Omega. He's the beginning and the end, and nearness prayer and the practice of nearness prayer puts us in that place.

Oh, that I could find the words to compel you to nearness prayer, because it would so relieve your anxious burdens that so many of you have. That beautiful hymn, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, talks about lonely exile. That's the experience of anxiety.

It's like lonely exile. You're so deeply isolated. It's profoundly personal.

Listen to this description of anxiety. It's written from a perspective of a man named David Smith. He's a writer with the New York Times.

He's not writing from a Christian perspective. He writes very poignantly. He says this about anxiety and our personal experience.

From a sufferer's perspective, anxiety is always and absolutely personal. It is an experience, a coloration of the way one thinks, feels, and acts. It is a petty monster able to work such humdrum tricks as paralyzing you over your salad, convincing you that a choice between blue cheese and vinaigrette is as dire as between life and death.

Anxiety is a petty monster. Let me give you a specific nearness prayer practice. It's nine words.

It's a nine-word prayer. It comes out of a beautiful novel, *Descent of Water*, by Elizabeth Gouge. It's a nine-word prayer that's shared in the book to console someone who is plagued by anxiety and the fears that they have.

It's this prayer. I want to teach it to you. I want you to learn to practice it throughout your day.

It's my constant companion. Lord, have mercy. Thee I adore into thy hands.

Three lines of three words each. Lord, have mercy. Thee I adore into thy hands.

Let's do it together. Let's say it all together. Lord, have mercy.

Thee I adore into thy hands. I often follow that up with a very specific piece, right? Okay, so Lord, into your hands I give this. My journal is full of into your hands, X, Y, Z. Into your hands, X, Y, Z. So often as we fight with anxiety, it's about the future.

It's also about just feelings, anxious feelings that we have, feelings that are prompted by our view of certain elements of life, how we feel about money, how we feel about sexuality, how we feel about relationships, how we feel about our jobs. So many of our anxieties are that personal feeling reality. That's where Paul, speaking not just to the future of anxiety, but to feelings anxiety, speaks of a second practice that we can learn.

He says this, finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there's any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What Paul is saying is that you can learn to practice purity. You can learn to practice beauty, practice nobility.

What Paul is saying is that how you feed the petty monster has everything to do with the petty monster's strength. If you starve the petty monster and you don't feed the petty monster the world's view of relationships, the world's view of money, the world's view of violence, whatever the world's view might be, if you don't feed the petty monster the petty anxiety monster begins to starve and drop off and have far less influence in your life. But where you put your mind, and where you put your eyes, and where you put your hands, and where you engage your person, that will have everything to do with how you feel about your life.

There's actually this broad expansive kingdom of God. Whatever. That's a very important word in the text.

Whatever. Don't hear it with the cynicism of the late 20th century. Whatever.

Instead hear it with the glorious expansiveness. Whatever. That the whole world is God's creation.

What Paul is saying is there's so much beauty, there's so much nobility, there's so much purity. Whatever. Because God's created it all.

But we must discern because there is not in everything that purity, not in everything that beauty. And Paul is saying what you engage in, where you put yourself, has everything to do with how your heart will be affected. Because you align yourself with God's presence in God's kingdom by putting yourself where things are pure, where things are beautiful.

And you misalign yourself, and you misalign your emotions, and you misalign your thinking when you put yourself where the world wants you to be. And this is a source of incredible anxiety for so many. This is far from a fundamentalist screed.

This is the teaching of purity, which by the way is far more broad and advanced and engaging and sophisticated and interesting than the practice of impurity, which is boring and rote and the same thing over and over again, which comes from the devil of lies, who has no imagination whatsoever. So what Paul is saying is that purity is like a tool that opens up the life of peace. And you have to use the tool of purity, of beauty, and thinking on these things.

So I'm fixing my lawnmower, I'm changing my oil, and I'm feeling pretty good about it. So I'm trying to use open pliers, and I keep knocking my knuckles and bleeding. It's small bleeding, but I'm ready to make much of it.

My neighbor's watching me, he watches me do this all the time, and he's shaking his head, and I'm thinking, I'm going to get this, I'm going to get this bolt off and drain my oil and show him. Half an hour into that, I give up, and I walk over dejected, humbled, rejected, and I say to him, yet again, Chuck, I can't do something. He's like, well, Stuart, and he pulls, he's been waiting for me, you need a socket wrench.

Just put that on there, this is the standard size, it's going to work. Put that socket, boom, out comes the nasty oil just flowing out. That's powerful.

See, so many of us are using the wrong tool. We're engaged in the impure, ignoble, ugly life, and we're not getting anything open. We're not opening up to the life of peace.

Our knuckles are bloody with trying to make this life work, because we haven't aligned ourselves with where God is. We need to be really clear. So much of the amazing professional film and television that's being done, not all of it, but so much of it, is telling us a lie, far more than any of us want to believe.

I highly doubt that any of us, including myself, are innocent of not engaging television or film or other images in a way that told us a lie that we believed. Here's a story that many, people who are, they make this, right? You've got people making this media. It's not magical.

You have people with opinions and perspectives and worldviews who are making this. What they're making is, for example, this is a lie that they're telling you. They're telling you the lie that revenge, often violent revenge, is the heart of justice.

And they're getting you to cheer when violent revenge happens to someone else and they get comeuppance. They're telling the lie that evil overcomes good in the end. They're telling the lie that male sexuality and female sexuality are exactly the same, and sex is a matter of recreational excitement in which ultimately you exercise power over another.

They're telling you the lie, and this is one of the most pernicious and well-developed and sophisticated lies they're telling you, is that money will ultimately root you in a place of peace and security. And you feel anxious about your money because it's not aligned with the peaceful kingdom of God, it's aligned with what the world says about money. Because we took it in with a character that we admired and now we want to be like him or her.

We take this in and we take this in and we take this in, and it creates anxiety for us. Many of you, and I've been praying for you about this, you're flatlined in your spiritual life, and a significant part for some of you and why you're flatlined is you've been feeding the monster. You're just living in images and and words and ideas and thoughts and pictures of what is not the kingdom of God.

So here's simple counsel to a very complicated issue. If you're not sure about watching it, don't. If you're not sure about texting it, don't.

And even better than that, do. Do engage beauty. Put beauty throughout your house or your apartment or your dorm room.

You need images of beauty that are always reminding you of the goodness of God. Do engage incredible story. There is beautiful film being made.

Engage the beautiful film. Know what is true. What is true is defined by Philippians chapter 2, two chapters before this.

What is true is that Jesus Christ came in the form of a servant or a slave. He emptied himself and gave himself up a gift of life for others. What is true is the cross of Jesus Christ and it's the cross of Jesus Christ and the principle that we give up our lives for others.

That we give up our lives as a gift for others. This should determine what we're looking at and what we're watching. Whatever is broad and beautiful and expansive, but we need the healing of our minds and imaginations because we have fed the monster for far too long.

Some of you will get instantaneous relief from your anxiety if you just pull back on what you're looking at. The violence, the lie about money, the lie about your sexuality. It's a practice.

We have to learn how to do it. It's a practice of purity. Hear this phrase from Nicky Gumbel, pastor of Holy Trinity of Brompton in London.

Thoughts become actions. Actions become habits. Habits become character.

And character becomes our lives. Thoughts become actions. Actions become habits.

Habits become character. And character becomes our lives. So let me invite you this morning into a life of freedom from anxiety.

Into the life of the God of peace himself. The practice of prayer. The practice of purity.

Where is the Lord speaking to you today? Where could you take a step, a practice step, and come out of that lonely exile of anxiety? In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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