

**REVIEW**

Last week we preached from a text which includes a single verse which is among the best-known and most often memorized in the New Testament: **Philippians 1:21**. I wonder if you can recite it from memory?

*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

The personal testimony of Paul the apostle is summed up in this simple declarative sentence, one which can be spoken honestly only by the Christian who lives “in” Christ – one who both worships Jesus Christ as Saviour and lives under His lordship, one in whose life Christ has become the center.

“The Greek phrase rendered *to live is Christ and to die is gain* contains no verb. It literally reads, ‘to live Christ, to die gain’. Paul knew that living *is Christ*, because he would continue to serve Him while he lived. He also knew that dying would be gain because then he would be in God’s presence, able to worship and serve Him in holy perfection. Paul fully understood that wealth, power, influence, possessions, prestige, social standing, good health, business or professional success, and all other such things are transitory. Many acknowledge that truth, but not many live as it is true. Few can say with Paul’s utter sincerity *to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*.”

- John MacArthur: *Philippians*

“These striking words epitomize Paul’s life since Damascus. Once Paul was apprehended by Christ Jesus, Christ became the singular pursuit of his life. *Christ* – crucified, exalted Lord, present by the Spirit, coming King; *Christ*, the name that sums up for Paul the whole range of his new relationship to God: personal devotion, commitment, service, the gospel, ministry, communion, inspiration, everything. Such singular focus does not make Paul ‘other-worldly’; rather, it gives heart and meaning to everything he is and does as a citizen of two worlds, his heavenly citizenship determining his earthly.”

- Gordon D. Fee: *Philippians* (*The IVP New Testament Commentary series*)

What other perspective could produce the *hope* which infuses Paul’s life, no matter what his present circumstances? What else could explain his assured outlook on his tumultuous past, his uncertain future, and his difficult present situation (**Philippians 1:12-26**)? Paul’s Christian life had taken on the same motivation which characterized the incarnate life of our Lord. Once, while His disciples were worried about matters of food, Jesus told them: “*My food is to do the will of the One who sent Me, and to finish his work*” (**John 4:34**).

Living as he did – “in” Christ –, Paul had assumed the *mind* (or “attitude”) of Christ Himself. This morning, we’ll have a look at what such a life – what a congregation made up of such lives – might look like in today’s church. Let us pray.

## LESSON: *Philippians 1:27 – 2:4*

1. For most of Chapter 1 Paul had written in the *declarative* tense, expressing his appreciation for the church at Philippi, describing his prayers for that congregation, explaining his own perspective on the events of his recent past and the outcomes of his present situation, and musing hopefully about his indefinite future.
2. But he snaps back into “pastoral mode” in v.27, where his abrupt shift in tone (note the immediate move to the *imperative* tense) and intent is best captured in the most recent English translations of the New Testament: *Whatever happens* – “no matter what, whether I am permitted to see you again or not”; “whatever happens to me and whatever happens to you folks -- THIS is the business with which YOU folks should be occupied: *Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ* (v.27).
3. His initial concern is for the corporate health of the Philippian church. He exhorts the church toward **three critical characteristics** which should identify every local congregation dedicated to the ministry of the gospel.

a. **unity** – *Stand firm in one spirit* (v.27).

- (1) Let me tell you what unity in the local church (more fully developed by the apostle in **1 Corinthians 12**) does NOT look like: everybody in the church on the same page about the same things at the same time. This is what has led the Protestant church down the debilitating paths of denominationalism and local church-hopping.
- (2) Unity in the local church does not require doctrinal precision (apart from the person and work on the cross of Jesus Christ and adherence to the clear, unambiguous teaching of the Scriptures). Nor should it be dependent upon a specific “worship style”, or eschatological point of view. And ethnicity or race, for goodness’ sake, should have NOTHING to do with Christian unity! What about secular politics? or which English translation of the Bible is the only “true” one? or how we celebrate the Lord’s Supper? How and when we minister baptism?

I could go on and on. You know I could!

- (3) Unity in the church rests entirely upon two divine phenomena energized by a third: the grace of God the Father and the love of God the Son ministered in the church by the power of God the Holy Spirit, all ministered by the faithful preaching of the Word. These are what God supplies to His church to overrule our picky, prideful, and self-absorbed sinful natures and to bring together the even most stubborn and disparate congregation for the purpose of *striving together for the sake of the gospel*. What does unity in the church look like? Paul will explain in Chapter 2.

b. **ministry of the Word** -- *contend as one man for the faith of the gospel* (v.27)

Don't be distracted\* from what must always be the primary focus of the church – the ministry of the Christ-centered Word of God in preaching, teaching and sacrament for the purpose of making disciples who are equipped to do the work of the ministry.

\*Some of the distractions which can compromise a local church's focus on the ministry of the Word are, in and of themselves, entirely honourable: church-growth programs, commitment to excellence in worship music, fellowship groups of all kinds, diverse and well-intentioned social ministries, etc. But whenever the church's devotion to any of these supersedes its responsibility to minister the Word of God, it has missed our Lord's mark for it and runs the risk of "having its lamp stand removed from its place" (**Rev. 2:1-7**).

c. **steadfastness** – *Don't be intimidated by your enemies* (v.28, NLT)

(1) Don't fear the enemies outside the church – those who would ridicule, dismiss, stifle, or even persecute the church – forgive them, pray for them, behave yourselves, trust God and continue with the work of the ministry despite their opposition.

(2) Don't succumb to the enemies inside the church – those who are insufficiently committed, or spiritually immature, or non-cooperative, or especially those whose personal issues become divisive – forgive them and pray for them, but do not fail to exhort, rebuke and, if necessary, *discipline* them, trust God and continue the work of the ministry, with or without them.

4. But be warned: steadfastness (trusting fully in the promises and abiding presence of God, whatever happens) will produce some level of suffering. Paul concludes this section in v.29-30 by reminding the church at Philippi of two bracing truths:

a. Adversity and the suffering it produces – whether the physical torments of persecution from without or the debilitating, frustrating torments of adversity from within – can be legitimately understood as signs:

(1) of the authenticity of your salvation,

(2) of the genuineness of your belief, and

(3) of the significance of your mission.

Satan won't waste his wiles in churches which pose no threat to his evil intents -- those churches which do not edify their members by the faithful proclamation of the gospel, do not exhort their members toward spiritual transformation and Christ-likeness, or do not equip their members for the work of the ministry. Such churches are harmless, and he

will be pleased to leave them in that state. But Satan will wield his weapons against and sew seeds of triviality and discord into those churches whose members are, in fact, *striving together for the [sake] of the gospel*, impacting their families, their communities, and the world with the truth about sin, salvation and the kingdom of God. Such churches do *indeed* pose a threat to his strangle-hold on the world, and he will go to nefarious lengths to oppose them.

- b. Even the most faithful, mature, and accomplished disciples – like Paul himself – live their lives *in the midst of this great struggle* (v.30, NLT). Most of those in Philippi surely remembered the public floggings of Paul and Silas in their own town.
5. In Chapter 2 Paul’s tone shifts again, and his tender heart is revealed in **2:1-4**. He is, perhaps, concerned that the earnest intensity of His exhortations is coming across as too harsh, so his language become rhetorical and sympathetic as he describes in more detail how a local church can accomplish true unity of purpose. Consider, if you will, the pastoral sweetness of his entreaty.

*Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from His love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. (NLT)*

- a. Paul wanted to make sure that his good friends in Philippi understood that **unity** is the critical component of the corporate health of the local church.
- b. He wanted them to learn that the members’ genuine **love** for one another is the critical component of corporate unity.
- c. And he wanted them to comprehend that authentic **humility** – voluntary selflessness on the part of the individual members – is the critical component of genuine love.

## LESSONS

1. These critical components of **unity**, **love**, and **humility** are the transformative **primary outcomes** of the faithful ministry of the Word as it is empowered by the Holy Spirit in its presentation and reception. All the good things we associate with a “healthy” church, then, are the **energized secondary outcomes** of the same anointing:
  - a. robust corporate worship
  - b. acts of authentic fellowship in gathering and in the meeting of needs

- c. believers maturing into disciples
- d. families encouraged and strengthened
- e. numerical growth borne of personal evangelism
- f. an impact for good in the local community

**2. Let us agree to be taught by Paul in these matters.**

Let us agree to be buoyed by the grace of God, inspired by the cross of Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit as we – however slowly and awkwardly, but nonetheless deliberately – pursue the divine work assigned to this church. Let us each one search his or her heart and repent of anything which compromises the exercise of selfless love in true humility toward our corporate goals of vibrant unity, productive disciple-making, and effective evangelism, *solī Deo gloria. Amen.*