

## A Life Worthy of the Gospel

Philippians 1:21-30

The only thing better than having a garden of your own is having a neighbor who has a garden. Our next-door neighbors, Bill and Nancy, plant a substantial garden every summer. It produces more than they can possibly use themselves. So, we and our other neighbors are the beneficiaries. Four or five times a summer, Bill leaves a bag of fresh, vine-ripe tomatoes on our front porch. We never know when they are going to show up, but we are glad when they do.

One afternoon a few weeks ago, our son Andrew was home and he offered to make dinner. He asked if we had any tomatoes. It had been more than a week since Bill's last delivery and all of the tomatoes he had brought had been used up. We were all out. I said, "Well, let me check to see if, by any chance, there are some fresh ones on the front porch." It was a long shot, but I thought it was worth a try.

I went to our front door, opened it, and I'm not kidding – there was Bill walking up our driveway with a bag of fresh tomatoes in his hand. I said, "Bill, you won't believe this, but I just walked out here to see if by any chance there were any tomatoes on our porch – and here you are!"

Some might say it was a sign from God. I don't know. I'm more inclined to think it was just a happy coincidence. But something else happened in the last few weeks that seems to me to be more than happenstance. Since January, I've been using the lectionary as a guide for my preaching. The lectionary is a list of Scripture readings for the church year. Every Sunday there is a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the Psalms and a reading from the letters of the New Testament (known as "epistles") and, finally, one from the Gospels.

I've been especially praying that God would give me the right messages for these final Sundays that I will be preaching. When I read the

"epistle" for this Sunday, it seemed that the Holy Spirit was walking up the driveway with a bag of tomatoes. See if you don't agree.

[Read Phil. 1:21-30]

Tell me, is that not amazing?

Paul's situation was different, of course. He was in prison – probably in Rome. He was soon to go on trial for a capital offense. In other words, the outcome could very well be a death sentence. He had now spent many years as an apostle to the Gentiles. He had experienced the thrill of seeing lives transformed by the gospel that he preached. But he had also endured great persecution and suffering for his commitment to Christ. It's easy to imagine that Paul would have been depressed by his circumstances. It seemed that he had arrived at a dead end.

But what Paul saw was not a dead end. He recognized that God was at work even in this challenging situation. Back in verse 12 he says, "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel." His imprisonment had brought him into contact with people he might never have otherwise met. His consistent witness to Christ in the middle of his suffering had been inspiring to the Christians who were watching his life.

I. If we think, however, that Paul was in denial regarding the threats that hung over his life we are mistaken. In the verse right before the beginning of the passage we read a moment ago, he says, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, *whether by life or by death*" (v. 20). So, Paul wasn't excluding the possibility of death. He knew that it was a distinct possibility. But he saw either scenario – life or death – to be a way to exalt Christ.

Paul's experience had brought him to a unique perspective on life and death. "For to me to live is Christ," he writes, "and to die is gain." This was a perspective that ran counter to the culture in which Paul lived – and it runs counter to the culture in which *we* live. There were influential people in the

ancient world – people like Socrates and Plato – who saw death as a way out of the misery of mortal existence.<sup>1</sup> That same view is shared by many today. It’s understandable in some cases.

My oldest son, Aaron, had an older friend who was a writer and New York Times correspondent. In 2010 he was diagnosed with a terminal illness. He wrote about his experience in the Times. In some ways, he said, it was liberating. He no longer worried about eating fatty foods. He didn’t worry about having enough money to grow old. He likened the experience to dancing. He was spinning around, happy in the last rhythms of the life he loved. But “when the music stops,” he said, “when I can’t tie my bow tie, tell a funny story, walk my dog, talk to [my daughter], kiss someone special, or tap out lines like this – I’ll know that Life is over. It’s time to be gone.”<sup>2</sup> He saw death as the ultimate escape from his suffering.

Again, that perspective is understandable. But Paul had a different perspective. “For to me to live is Christ,” he says. In other words, for Paul, life was a joyful embrace of the story of Jesus. Ever since his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul’s life had been a vehicle for bringing glory to Christ. Because of the life of Christ – because of the cross – Paul understood that Christ was seen through him not only when he was dancing but also – even especially – when the music stopped. Later, in chapter 3, he writes, “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

When Christ is our life, the struggles and the difficulties become the very places where the power of God is most fully revealed. If the outcome of his trial was that he would go on living, then Paul knew that God would continue to make his life productive. But if the outcome of the trial meant his death, he knew that Christ would be exalted in that experience as well.

Paul’s attitude and example show us that death can be faced with assurance and confidence. Paul was not in denial about death. His highest priority was not to avoid death. We do everything we can cosmetically to slow the aging process – at least on the outside. Modern medicine does everything it can to prolong life which sometimes makes it difficult for individuals and families to determine when and how to let go. Paul did not live with that kind of mindset. While he wasn’t trying to escape his present circumstances, neither was he dreading the inevitability of death. “What shall I choose?” he writes. “I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (vv. 22-23).

Paul saw this as a win-win situation. It was hard for him to choose between the two alternatives. His attitude kept him, on the one hand, from complaining about his circumstances as if God had let him down. On the other, he refused to try to manipulate his situation according to what he thought – as if God could not be trusted.<sup>3</sup> The amazing thing was that his primary motivation was not what was better for *him*. Instead, he was driven by his desire, first, to exalt Christ and, second, to see those who were under his care make progress in their faith. He was modeling what he calls the Philippians to in the next chapter when he says, “In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Really, this is the only way to live. I wouldn’t begin to compare my situation to Paul’s. But it has been surprising to me that despair and depression have not been factors up to this point in my experience. I have yet to shed my first tear over my disease. I know that part of that is due to the fact that I am a guy and I compartmentalize things. And I know that tears can be very healthy. But the heaviness of the situation has been offset by the opportunities that it has brought. I’ve had conversations with people that I would never have had without it. I’ve had opportunities to minister to people with increased credibility

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Flemming, *Philippians* (2009), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Dudley Clendinen, *The Good Short Life*, (The New York Times, July 9, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Flemming, p.77.

and insight. I've experienced the blessing of having people beside whom I've walked for the last 22 years now walk beside me. Most of all, I've had the greatest potential for pointing people to Christ that I've had in my entire life. It's hard to make a connection between joy and ALS – but honestly, sometimes no other word fits.

I'm not naïve to the possibility that I may experience some valleys in the months ahead. But I am praying that I will continue to embrace Paul's perspective – "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

II. And here is my hope and prayer for you – "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Paul turns a corner at this point in his letter. Paul's own situation fades into the background and the circumstances that were challenging the Philippians take front and center.

There is a subtlety in Paul's language in this verse that doesn't come through in the NIV. He uses a word that refers to "citizenship." "Live out your citizenship in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Philippi was a colony of Rome. It was the leading city of Macedonia. People born there had status as Roman citizens. That citizenship brought with it both privileges and responsibilities.

By using that word – citizenship --Paul is reminding these Christians that they are part of a community based on the gospel of Christ. Our citizenship has to do with the way in which we conduct ourselves as part of the community. Paul is saying that our visible life as a community must be worthy of the gospel. The way that we treat each other in the middle of our differences and personal interests speaks volumes to the world around us.

I'm not the only one moving into a new chapter in my life. You are too. The LifeStream community is going to be wrestling with some important decisions in the next several months. There may be times when differences of opinion emerge. My hope is that, whatever happens, you will conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

What will that look like? From what Paul says in the next several paragraphs, it is clear that a life worthy of the gospel must continually reflect Jesus' self- giving love for others. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," Paul says at the beginning of chapter 2. "Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:3-7).

Verses 6-11 of Philippians 2 are considered to contain some of the loftiest theology in the entire New Testament. But we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the context for those lofty thoughts is the practical working out of our Christian faith in our life together as a community.

The most powerful testimony we give to the gospel is seen in our relationships together. The question is, "Can we honestly say that we value others above ourselves." It's often in the little things that we show where our interests really lie.

A couple of weeks ago, it was becoming clear that the celebration next Sunday was going to stretch our building's capacity. Our leadership team was trying to figure out what to do. The first suggestion was that we would run a video feed to our fellowship area so that the overflow crowd could watch from there. That made me nervous. There was the risk of technical breakdowns – but I was also concerned about the possible conflicts we were setting up and how that might make us look.

It took me back about ten years to the spring when our daughter, Amanda, was in her high school musical. They were doing Les Miserables that year and Amanda had landed the part of Cosette and I was a proud father. There was a lot of interest in the community and advance ticket sales were brisk. Opening night arrived and both sets of grandparents along with other family members joined us for dinner and then we headed for the high school

auditorium. There were twelve of us as I recall. We got there early so that we could be close to the front of the line. Seating was on a first come, first served basis. When the doors opened, I walked as briskly into the auditorium as I could to claim our seats. I scoped out some prime territory where we could sit together and then waited impatiently for the rest of our family members. But before they could get there, another family began to sit down in several of the seats. I panicked. I said, “Excuse me, but these seats are taken.” These seats are taken?! What was I thinking? I can assure you that I was *not* looking out for the interests of others at that moment. I knew that I had blown it when the other family put their tails between their legs and moved to another section.

Afterward, I went to them and apologized.

I guess you could argue that it was a fairly small thing, but those are the things that others notice when they are looking at our lives. Those are the things that either build up or tear down the quality of our life together. Let me say it again. A life worthy of the gospel must continually reflect Jesus’ self-giving love for others.

III. Lives that are worthy of the gospel of Christ are marked by several essential qualities to which Paul points in these verses. The first is steadfastness. “Then,” Paul says, “whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit” (v. 27). The Philippians were facing opposition. They probably would have been incapable of standing up to it alone. But because they shared life together in the Spirit of Christ, they could keep their feet under them in the face of their trials.

Paul also encourages them to “strive together as one for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27). Striving together implied strenuous effort. They were not to be passive in living out the gospel of Christ. It was a team effort. They were in this thing together. Notice also that Paul doesn’t emphasize what they are striving *against* but what they are striving *for* – “the faith of the gospel.” While it’s true that there will be times when we will need to stand against evil and

injustice, the primary goal of our life together is to point people to the love and grace of Jesus. *He* is the One who changes lives.

The third quality to which Paul calls is courage under pressure. He tells the Philippians not “to be frightened by those who oppose you.” Let me say here that one of the principles by which I’ve tried to live my life is to believe the best of other people and their motives. Sometimes we think people are against us when they’re really not. I think that has served me well. Having said that, however, there are times when we will face genuine opposition. Even then, our attitudes must reflect the self-giving love of Jesus. But it’s also true that we cannot allow ourselves to give in to fear of those people. It’s possible to be both gracious and confident at the same time because our confidence isn’t in ourselves but in the gospel of Jesus. It’s because of His life and His message that we face every challenge and we face the future with assurance.