

# *Christ-Centered Relationships*

*Philippians 1:12-30*

We live in a world of selfdom. People have their own worlds, their own stories, their own ethics. The only commonly agreed upon evil is not to accept the truth of this. So while people claim to care about others it is often simply another form of self-service.

What does the gospel say in a world of selfdom?

What does Christ say in a world of selfdom?

How are Christians to live in a world of selfdom?

Here are some selfdom exposing questions:

I live to...

I would die for...

How much do you love people? Let me phrase that another way: what are you willing to give up in order to maintain a relationship with people?

What does real ministry to people cost you? What does it mean for the gospel to be at the center of relationships?

*In Christ-centered relationships, the gospel is advanced through serving and suffering.*

## **Your Poise in Troubles (v.12-14)**

There are unexpected results of Paul's confinement in prison. The Gospel work is expanding.

<sup>12</sup>I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, <sup>13</sup> so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. <sup>14</sup> And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

### ***Realizing God's Sovereign Control (v.12)***

What appears at first to be a severe limitation does not work out that way. Certainly, it would be natural to be alarmed at Paul being put in prison. One would wonder whether the cause of Christianity is going to suffer because its primary leader is now confined.

But God's plan is actually being worked out. God has used this circumstance to advance the cause of the gospel. In all likelihood, Paul is chained to a Roman guard. He is no longer free to travel and preach. But rather than restricting the gospel, this has rather worked out for the good. This is not due to fate or chance. God is in control, and He is working out His plan.

In all our circumstances, we need to learn to recognize God's providence. We use this word, providence, to refer to the fact that God is in control of everything. He has planned and allowed Paul's hardship. He has planned yours as well. You can accept this as being true or you can reject it. The result of acceptance is a settled peace as you trust God. The result of rejecting it will be a growing bitterness and anger.

### ***Recognizing the Gospel's Strategic Advance (v.13-14)***

Paul is showing us that the gospel is making a strategic advance. Imprisonment has opened new frontiers for the gospel.

## **Within the Roman army and royal family (v.13)**

The gospel has now reached through the whole imperial guard. Paul has witnessed and preached to those he came in contact with. Through his imprisonment, the Roman army, the prison guards and the royal household have begun to be evangelized. This is a happy outcome. What appeared to limit Christian outreach and growth had really been used by God to open up new opportunities. The effect of this was the establishing of a church in Rome to whom Paul later wrote the letter we know as the book of Romans.

Even in prison, Paul has sought to establish gospel relationships. He has taken the opportunity to talk to the people around him about Christ. Imagine being an unbeliever and chained to Paul for 8 to 12 hours! There he is confined in prison yet confident in God's power and purposes.

## **By greater boldness in witnessing (v.14)**

The gospel also advances because others have greater boldness to preach. Seeing that Paul was confined, they gathered up more courage to speak more often and with greater boldness.

God has given courage where fear would be natural. People should actually be worried, anxious and fearful that they are also going to be thrown into prison. Yet, that is not the effect. Rather, people have stepped up to witness where they might not have before.

So how is God using your own difficult circumstances? Has trouble or difficulty brought you out to church today seeking some help? Has some circumstance caused you to wonder how God could help you?

Maybe as a Christian, you need to rethink and reevaluate your own circumstances. How is God working through it to start or even to strengthen relationships? Are you in contact with people you wouldn't be otherwise. This past week, through my eye issues, I had the opportunity to meet and talk to three new people whom I have never met before. Two of them I got to speak of my trust in God through this time.

How is God advancing the gospel through your own difficult circumstances?

What is your poise in the midst of troubles?

## **Your Perspective on Motivations (v.15-18)**

Well, it is too bad that many people do the right things from the wrong motivations. That was true of the responses around Paul's suffering. What an interesting perspective on people's motivations and relationships.

<sup>15</sup> Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. <sup>16</sup> The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. <sup>17</sup> The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup> What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

How then does having a Christ-centered view of relationships affect our observation of other people's ministries?

## **Having a Sense of Reality (v.15-17)**

Paul has a deep sense of the reality of what is going on. He is no pie-in-the-sky leader. He knows and understands people's motives. We are not told how he knows what he says, here. But he speaks so factually it would be natural to conclude that *these very same motivations are present in the church at Philippi*.

It will help us to hear what Paul is saying by noting how he says it. Look at the structure of the text.

From envy and rivalry

From good will

Out of love

Out of rivalry, not sincerity

People were being motivated to more courageous witnessing and preaching, but not all out of good intentions and love. Some were simply taking advantage to promote themselves. They wanted to be first, to have the preeminence. So, they stepped up to do what needed to be done.

This is an important development of his theme - there evidently were those in Philippi who were of both groups. Praise God for those who stepped up because of sincere love and good intentions. But some were not and it was threatening their relationship. Selfish ambition, self-promotion and jealousy were motivating people to get out and proclaim the gospel.

Now before we think this is too weird, let me remind you that lots of people can do good work, even good work in the Lord's kingdom driven by hidden, subtle and sinful motivations. There is simply a lot of jockeying to be recognized and to have influence. I pray we as a church will so very careful about this. But it exists. So how will we respond to it?

### ***Being Generous in Response (v.18)***

Paul's response is amazingly generous. Even when people were thinking to do Paul harm, he is glad that Christ is preached. He is not condoning the sinful motivations. That is clear here and will become even clearer later. But he has a Christ-centered approach to everything. He is glad that Christ is preached even if people are doing so out of bad and sinful.

Now these people were preaching the gospel and preaching Christ. He is not here accepting both bad motivations and bad ministry. Paul is clearly against those who fiddle with the gospel and move Jesus out of the center of things. But here, in spite of their envy and rivalry, they were preaching the truth. So, he rejoices in the effect - that the Lord is made known.

Paul is holding up a window through which he shows us others. But he is going to turn it into a mirror to show us ourselves.

### **Your Purpose in Relationships (v.19-26)**

But first, we will see Paul's own personal thinking about Christ-centered relationships. He highlights his purpose in the relationships he has built.

Yes, and I will rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, <sup>20</sup> as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. <sup>24</sup> But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. <sup>25</sup> Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup> so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

### ***Expecting God's Work (v.19)***

Expect that God will work through our relationships. Through his prayer for them (in verses 1-11) Paul expected that God will grow their love along with knowledge and discernment.

Through their prayers for him, he expects that God will deliver him. Our relationships are part

of the way God works in Christians. We are connected through God's Spirit. God works through our praying for one another. This is both the privilege and responsibility of being God's people together.

### ***Desiring to Bring Glory to Christ (v.20-21)***

Regardless, we long to bring glory to the Lord Jesus. For Paul, the deliverance from prison may be release by the government or release by death. But whatever that deliverance is going to be, he wants to honor Christ with courage in the moment. He does not want to be ashamed.<sup>1</sup> He wants to face what God's providence brings him with courage and confidence. He does not want to dishonor Christ. So he is training forward with single-minded determination to bring glory to the Lord whether he lives or dies.

Why? Because to continue in life is Christ, but to die is gain. What does this mean? It means that Paul sees death as gain because he will be with Jesus. But to live is Christ? For Paul, and thus for us, Christ defines what it means to truly live. But he does not just desire to keep on living; he desires to have Christ live through him. Because dying is gain, then living is Christ.

As D.A. Carson writes, "In the context, 'to live is Christ' surely means that for Paul to keep on living here means ministry, Christ-centered ministry, Christ-empowered ministry, Christ's presence in his ministry. To die is to bring that ministry to an end. But even so there is only gain, since the ministry is not an end in itself, and it is now swallowed up in the glorious delight of the unshielded presence of the exalted Jesus himself."<sup>2</sup>

Here is a good test for us. How would you fill in each blank?

- For you, to **live** is \_\_\_\_\_. What would go in the blank? Now don't just give me some spiritually acceptable answer. What really makes you live? Kids? Marriage? Sports? A sport? Music?
- For you, to **die** is \_\_\_\_\_. How do you think about dying? What makes you want to cling to life? Why do you fear dying? What makes you say, "Please, not now."

### ***Being Torn between Two Desires (v.22-23)***

This then causes him to be torn between two desires. He wants to stay here and live because it will be fruitful in the people he loves. But to die will mean being with the Lord Jesus whom he loves the most. Here is how dying is gain – it is far better to be with Jesus. Now this is not being torn in such a way that he is unhappy. No, he is full of joy being torn between two glad choices. It is like having someone offer to give you a car and you get to choose between a BMW and a Jaguar.

Is this how you think? Does this sound alien to you? Maybe this sounds strange to you because you do not have a real relationship with Jesus. Now don't hear to be talking religious jargon. Think of one person with whom you really have a loving relationship with. Got it? Now, do you have a comparable relationship with Jesus?

For all of us, God made a way for us to have this kind of relationship with Him. It is through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. You are separated from Christ and alienated from God. Jesus's death has reconciled His people to Himself. When you believe in Him and bow to Him, then you will have become a partaker of grace, a recipient of His life and enter into real fellowship with Christ.

I am not just talking to you to whom all this may be new and strange. I am talking to many of you who have believed, been baptized and have lived as a Christian for a while. Can you really

say that the greatest gain for you would be to die and go home to Jesus? Can you really say that pleasing and serving Christ makes you happier than anything else?

### ***Doing What is Best for Others (v.24)***

Here comes the huge surprise. Paul is content to stay on in this life for the good of the people he loves. He is so committed to their partnership in the gospel that he is willing to forego going home to be with Jesus in order to stay here for their good.

How often does this fit into our decision making? Would you forego a job move in order to stay in ministry here? Does your relationship with your brothers and sisters here affect your decision making? What would it take just simply for you to pack up and go to another church? How often are those decisions mostly if not exclusively about us – about what is good for us? May we have the grace of being deeply committed to doing what is best for others.

### ***Resonating with the Joy of Others (v.25-26)***

Since he is utterly convinced that it is vital for them for him to not die, he is glad to wait to go to heaven for their good. He will work hard for their progress and joy in the faith. Here is the gospel in his relationship with them. Here is the grace they are all partaking in. He loves to see them growing in maturity. And He loves to share the joy they have as believers.

Why? He is sure that their prayers will result in God delivering him from prison so that he can return to them. When they are back together they will be able to glory in Christ because of their relationship together.

This paragraph has shown a lot of Paul's heart. We saw his relationship with people who were taking courage to witness and preach Christ more, even from faulty motives. Now we see how he values his personal relationship with the people in the church in view of his relationship with Christ.

### **Your Priorities in Community (v.27-30)**

But, what is all this going to mean for them? What about their relationship with each other and with Paul? What priorities shape their life together in the community of the church?

<sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. <sup>29</sup> For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, <sup>30</sup> engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

What should we put first in our relationships in the church? What are our priorities?

### ***Unify around the Gospel (v.27)***

Paul wants them to unify around the gospel. Here is the first clear admonition to deal with the fragmentation that was taking place. They were partners in the gospel and partakers in grace so think and act like it. Change your motivations for ministry even if you have stepped up in serving. Paul is happy for the preaching of the gospel while he is correcting the wrong attitudes toward people serving in the gospel.

Seek a kind of unity that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. This is not just in who we align with in ministry, but affects our whole manner of life, our whole lifestyle. Live your life around the gospel. Live your life worthy of the gospel. So, seek oneness in attitude and action.

Seek to be one with those who believe the gospel *as it is taught in the Bible*. Our standing and striving is for *the faith of the gospel*. This is not about the verb, *to believe*. This is about the noun,

*doctrine.* We are then to be one with those who confess the true gospel so that we are partners and partakers in the grace of God.

Biblical fellowship, partnership, and relationships around the gospel, have to be discerning and discriminating. This is not “love covers all errors” but love finds and unites with true partners.

### ***Stand against the Enemies (v.28)***

That becomes obvious from verse 28. There will be opponents. There will be those who will attempt to frighten us out of witnessing and preaching the gospel. There are those who would even attempt to intimidate us from the kind of preaching and teaching that tries to stay faithful to the Word. They may use everything from scorn to bullying to threats to persecution. After all, Paul is writing this from prison having been put there because of the gospel. Therefore courage is called for even as we stand against enemies.

That unfailing courage then is a witness against them. It testifies to the fact of salvation. God’s people will be willing to suffer for the salvation that God gives. It also testifies to their coming destruction. It has a condemning effect. History is full of the writings of people who, having attacked and condemned Christians, became filled with regret, guilt and fear. At the stoning of Stephen, even Paul, who stood by approvingly, seems to have been deeply affected by his courage.

### ***Suffer in the Serving (v.29)***

<sup>29</sup> For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, <sup>30</sup> engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Well, we like to unify and to stand – but suffer? Do you hear what God expects of His people? God has ordained, not only that you believe, but also that you suffer. This is one of those verses that we simply don’t resonate with. We do not know what it means to suffer. That a harsh look or an abrupt email causes us pain is simply evidence of spiritual fragility. What about real enemies? What about real opposition? What about real suffering? What about having to “present yourself to the police” as one of the church leaders we were training two weeks ago did.

I want to be totally clear about this. Some may be here this morning considering or inquiring about church, about God, about believing in the gospel. The Bible never hides the cost of believing and bowing to Christ. There is much to rejoice over in what God provides. But you had better understand that there will almost certainly be suffering along the way.

That suffering comes because of the conflict in the gospel. Personal conflict is threatening their relationships. But gospel conflict is bringing the kind of suffering that God has ordained.

Are these priorities shaping your relationships in the church? You are committed to serving together in the gospel, to standing courageously against the enemies and to suffer for the sake of Christ and the gospel. Why? Because above all things, you crave to please and honor Christ whether you live or die. To you, to live is Christ. To you, to die is gain.

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## Reflect and Respond

Do you recognize God's bringing people into your life through difficult circumstances?

How do your perceptions/evaluations of people's motives affect your relationships?

How do you handle bad motives in the midst of important work/ministry?

Does it surprise you that Christians might need to be willing to give up seeking Jesus now in order to serve others now?

How does the last paragraph (Ministry partnerships in the midst of opposition) impact your thinking about relationships?

To you, to live is \_\_\_\_\_. To you, to die is \_\_\_\_\_.

Be honest. Repent. Put the gospel first; put Christ at the center of your relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul is often concerned about not being ashamed. But to go to those texts to inform this one will send us down the wrong path. Paul wants to face this deliverance unashamed so that he will bring honor to Christ. How he goes through what God brings him next is what he wants courage and confidence for.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, D. A. *Basics for Believers : An Exposition of Philippians*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996.