

The Christian's Contentment

The Advance of the Gospel

Philippians 1:12-18

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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The Advance of the Gospel

Scripture

We are in a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians that I am calling, "The Christian's Contentment."

After the opening greeting of his letter to the Philippian Christians, Paul gave thanks to God for them, and then he prayed for them. He had planted the church in Philippi about ten years earlier, and the Philippian church was probably Paul's favorite church. He wrote this letter to the Philippians while under house arrest in Rome. As he began to write the body his letter to the Philippians, Paul wanted them to know that despite his imprisonment, the gospel was advancing.

So, let's read about the advance of the gospel in Philippians 1:12-18:

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

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. (Philippians 1:12-18)

Introduction

In his book titled *Battling Unbelief*, John Piper tells the story about Charles Simeon, who was a pastor in the Church of England for 54 years, from 1782 to 1836, at Trinity Church in Cambridge. He was appointed to his church by a bishop against the will of the people. They opposed him, not because he was a bad preacher, but because he was an evangelical—he believed the Bible and called for conversion and holiness and world evangelization. For twelve years the people refused to let him give the Sunday afternoon sermon. And during that time they boycotted the Sunday morning service and locked their pews so that no one could sit in them. He preached to people in the aisles for twelve years! The average stay of a pastor in America is less than four years. Simeon began with twelve years of intense opposition—and lasted fifty-four years.¹ Charles Simeon was committed to Christ, and endured all kinds of opposition for the sake of advancing the gospel.

Simeon was a little like the Apostle Paul, who endured all kinds of hardships for the sake of advancing the gospel.

Lesson

Philippians 1:12-18 teaches us to put the advance of the gospel at the center of our ambitions.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Paul's Report (1:12-13)
2. Paul's Reaction (1:14-17)
3. Paul's Rejoicing (1:18)

¹ John Piper, *Battling Unbelief* (The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition), 85-87.

I. Paul's Report (1:12-13)

First, let's look at Paul's report.

Paul became a Christian a few years after Jesus was crucified. He served the Lord Jesus Christ zealously and unceasingly for over three decades. He planted almost a dozen churches, preached innumerable times, and wrote thirteen letters that are in the canon of the New Testament.

At one point along the way, Paul, who was a missionary to the Gentiles, wanted to take the gospel to Spain, after returning once more to Jerusalem and stopping for a visit Rome. He had even hoped to preach the good news of the gospel in Rome to Caesar and the Roman government, the most powerful government in the world at that time.

But Paul's plans were not fulfilled. Instead of traveling to Jerusalem, then to Rome, and finally on to Spain, he found himself a prisoner under house arrest in Rome on trial for his life. When Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians he had no assurance that he would ever be a free man again.

James Montgomery Boice quotes another commentator, J. A. Motyer, who summarized the things that happened to Paul in the following stirring way:

What...happened began in Acts 21:17 when the apostle set foot in Jerusalem, forewarned by the Holy Spirit that bonds and imprisonment awaited him....An entirely false accusation was leveled at him by his own people (21:28); he was nearly lynched by a religious mob, and ended up in the Roman prison, having escaped a flogging only by pleading citizenship (22:22ff.). His whole case was beset by a mockery of justice, for, though right was on his side, he could not secure a hearing. He was made the subject of unjust and unprovoked insult and shame (23:2), malicious misrepresentation (24:5; 25:6f.),

and deadly plot (23:12 ff.; 25:1ff.). He was kept imprisoned owing to official craving for popularity (24:27), or for money (24:26), or because of an over-punctilious facade of legalism (26:32)....

Even then his sufferings were not over. There came the prolonged trial of the storm at sea (Acts 27) where his life hung, as it seemed, by a thread, both because of the elements (verse 20) and because of petty officiousness (verse 42). Eventually, when he reached Rome it was far from the ambassadorial entry that he had doubtless looked for (19:21). He came in the company of the condemned, bound by a chain, and destined to drag out at least two years under arrest awaiting the uncertain decision of an earthly king.”²

Nevertheless, still under house arrest, still chained to a Roman soldier, still not having had a trial, and the future still uncertain, Paul looked on all that had transpired, and wrote in verse 12, **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”** That was Paul’s ambition: not his own comfort, but the advance of the gospel. But Paul’s critics believed that he had let the side down by getting arrested and sent to Rome. They thought that Paul’s appeal to Caesar could bring Christianity down. They believed Paul’s zeal was a problem for the gospel.

Paul went on to explain how the gospel was advancing. He wrote in verse 13, **“...it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”** Apparently, the whole imperial guard numbered almost nine thousand soldiers. So, some commentators write that there was no way that Paul could have personally witnessed to nine thousand soldiers in two years. D.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 51–52.

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A. Carson writes that there is a much simpler explanation:

Paul proved to be such an extraordinary prisoner, and his witness so telling, that stories about him circulated very quickly. It was not that each of the Praetorian soldiers took a turn guarding Paul and therefore heard his story from his own lips. Rather, every soldier who was assigned this duty heard the gospel, and perhaps something of his testimony, and then told others. Paul was neither a hardened criminal nor a suave “white collar” swindler. Instead of protesting his innocence or gauging his chances of impressing Caesar’s court, he spent his time talking about a Jew called Jesus, who had been crucified at the eastern end of the Mediterranean and (if Paul is to be believed) had somehow risen from the dead. And according to this prisoner, not only will this Jesus be our judge on the last day, but the only hope anyone has of being accepted by God is by trusting this Jesus. In short, Paul was proving to be such an extraordinary prisoner that stories about him began to circulate around the palace—and not only stories about him, but the gospel story as well. And that, Paul insists, is wonderful. There has been an advance in the circulation of the gospel because I am in chains.³

II. Paul’s Reaction (1:14-17)

Second, let’s examine Paul’s reaction.

It turns out that there were two reactions by Paul, first, concerning his friends, and second, concerning his foes.

A. *Concerning His Friends (1:14, 16)*

First, let’s look at Paul’s reaction concerning his friends.

³ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 23–24.

Paul wrote in verse 14, **“And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”** And, again in verse 16, referring to these same friends, he wrote, **“[They] do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.”** Sometimes, learning about the hardship and difficulty of fellow believers may strengthen otherwise timid Christians to speak up for Jesus.

D. A. Carson writes, “Older readers of these pages will remember the five Wheaton College graduates in the 1950s who lost their lives in an attempt to bring the gospel to the Auca Indians. Among the excellent unforeseen results was the very high number of Wheaton graduates who year after year for the next decade or two offered themselves for missionary service. Because of the death of the ‘Auca five,’ many were ‘encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.’”⁴ Scores and scores of young people entered into full-time missions or gospel ministry as a result of their testimony. In fact, my own call to gospel ministry was as a result of reading Jim Elliot’s biography, written by his wife Elizabeth Elliot, titled *The Shadow of the Almighty*.

There are believers around the world who faithfully proclaim the gospel even though they face persecution. Their lives have been transformed by Jesus Christ and they do what they can to share the good news of the gospel with others who are on their way to an eternity in hell without Christ.

B. *Concerning His Foes (1:15, 17)*

And second, let’s look at Paul’s reaction concerning his

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 24.

foes.

Paul wrote in verse 15a, **“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry....”** He continued in verse 17, **“[They] proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.”** Who are these who have motives of **envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition?**

The first thing to note is that they are not heretics. They are not preaching “another Christ” or “another gospel.” Paul wrote to the Galatians in Galatians 1:8–9, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” No. Paul said to the Philippians that these preachers **“preach Christ”** (1:15) and **“proclaim Christ”** (1:17). They were not preaching and proclaiming the Mormon Christ, the Jehovah’s Witnesses Christ, the liberal Christ, or the health, wealth, and prosperity Christ. So, the preachers to whom Paul was referring were indeed preaching the true Christ, but their motives were all wrong. D. A. Carson writes:

In this case, the people Paul has in mind are those that must be understood to lie behind verse 12. They think that Paul has done damage to the Christian cause by getting himself arrested. Probably they magnify their own ministry by putting Paul down. We can imagine their pompous reflections: “It really is sad that so great a man as Paul has frittered away his gospel opportunities simply because he is so inflexible. After all, I and many others manage to remain at large and preach the gospel. One must assume that Paul has a deep character flaw that puts him in the path of trouble. *My* ministry is being blessed, while *he* languishes in prison.” Thus, the more they speak, the more their own ways are justified and

the more Paul is made to look foolish.⁵

Paul may have been hurt by their motives. Nevertheless, because they were preaching and proclaiming the true Christ, he was glad that the gospel was advancing.

III. Paul's Rejoicing (1:18)

And third, let's notice Paul's rejoicing.

Paul went on to conclude in verse 18, **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”** Paul's focus was the gospel. Paul's ambition was the advance of the gospel. That is why he rejoiced when Christ was proclaimed.

Dr. Don Carson put it this way:

Paul's example is impressive and clear: Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your aspirations. Our own comfort, our bruised feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives—all of these are insignificant in comparison with the advance and splendor of the gospel. As Christians, we are called upon to put the advance of the gospel at the very center of our aspirations.

What are your aspirations? To make money? To get married? To travel? To see your grandchildren grow up? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these is inadmissible; none is to be despised. The question is whether these aspirations become so devouring that the Christian's *central* aspiration is squeezed to the periphery or choked out of existence entirely.⁶

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 25.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 25–26.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Philippians 1:12-18, let us put the advance of the gospel at the center of our ambitions.

Is the advance of the gospel first and foremost in your ambitions? You don't need to be a preacher or a missionary or a full-time Christian worker to fulfill this ambition. You put the gospel at the center of your ambitions when you orient your life, your vocation, your calling, and even your leisure to see the gospel advanced. Let me give you a couple of examples.

The first example is my brother-in-law and sister-in-law, Dick and Mary Ann, who served as missionaries in Zimbabwe for thirty-five years. When they retired, they insisted that they were "not retiring, but refiring!" They settled in Columbia, SC near two of their children and their families. Immediately, they got involved in teaching the Bible in after-school programs. They organized teaching at a number of schools in the area. But perhaps the most exemplary acts I see are their interactions with waiters, cashiers, and other service personnel. They invariably find ways to offer prayer for them, or give them a gospel tract, or share the gospel with them. They are advancing the gospel, so that it is becoming known throughout the whole of Columbia, SC that their retirement is for Christ.

My second example is Rob, a highly specialized surgeon that we knew in the first church we served. He was a thoracic surgeon, and then went on to specialize in head and neck surgery, and finally specialized even further in cancer surgery of the head and neck. When he finally finished his training, he moved back to his home town in Dayton, OH to set up a private practice in cancer surgery of the head and neck. He asked me to come and dedicate his offices so that everything would

be done to the glory of God. I went to Dayton, and on a Sunday afternoon the staff of about 8 or 10 gathered, and we dedicated the practice to the Lord. I learned that in reality, the surgery practice was a glorious opportunity for the gospel. People with head or neck cancer realize they have a serious problem and are much more open to talk about eternity and the gospel. In fact, the doctor, his office manager, and some of the staff were trained in evangelism, and they used every opportunity to point patients to Jesus and the hope that is found in him alone. They are advancing the gospel, so that it is becoming known throughout the whole of Dayton, OH that the surgery practice is for Christ.

And my third example is of David and Holly, a couple in our own church family. They have started a ministry, supported by many in our church family, that is called “Hostage of Hope Ministries.” David is in prison and Holly supports the ministry with communication, fund-raising, and lots of other support. Because inmates don’t have sufficient toiletries and certainly no goodies (if they do not have friends or family who supply it), Hostage of Hope Ministries provides inmates with Mercy Bags, which includes items such food, soap, toothpaste, hygiene items, coffee, chips, and so on. These are given in order to show the love of Christ and to open opportunities to share the gospel. Written sermons from our church are also provided to inmates through the Hostage of Hope Ministries so that they may be strengthened and encouraged in the gospel. David and Holly are advancing the gospel, so that it is becoming known throughout the whole of the prison, that David’s imprisonment is for Christ.

Brothers and sisters, let us put the advance of the gospel at the center of our ambitions. It can be done! Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can
be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org