

Philippians 4:10-19

Communicating with the Afflictions of Others

...ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction – v. 14

Almost as good as hearing *well done* from Christ would be hearing *well done* from the Apostle Paul. I think you could say regarding Paul that he was very Christ-like when it came to giving a well deserved commendation and that he was also Christ-like in those times when he had to correct or rebuke a man. Paul never heaped vain flattery on a man nor did he hesitate to withstand a man to his face when the situation called for it.

So when he writes in v. 14 regarding the Philippians *ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction* we may interpret his words as meaning that the Philippians had indeed done something well. And what had they done? The way Paul describes it – they communicated with his affliction. The word *communicate* is a compound word in the Greek that occurs just two other times in the New Testament.

It is translated by the word *fellowship* in Eph. 5:11 *And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.* It's also translated by the word *partaker* in Rev. 18:4 *And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.* It's rather interesting to note how the term is used negatively in these other two instances telling the Lord's people where they should not fellowship or of what they should not partake.

In our text in Phil. 4:14 it is used positively to state what the Philippians had done that was to be commended. When we look at all the uses of the word, then, we can see that by communicating with Paul in his affliction they were fellowshiping with Paul. Or another way to put it would be to say they were partakers with Paul in the gospel. The noun form of this word is found back in 1:7 *Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.* Here, then, is what they partook of with Paul or fellowshiped with him or communicated to him – the gospel of grace.

It was because of the gospel of free grace through faith in Jesus Christ that the Philippians communicated with Paul in his affliction. Now we're not left in any doubt about what that communication looked like. The Philippians had taken up an offering for Paul. We don't know what all went into that offering but whatever went into it enabled Paul to say in v. 18 *But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.*

You may recall that in our last study in Philippians I pointed out that the immediate occasion for this epistle very well may be revealed here in the last verses of the epistle. And what Paul is writing here amounts to a Thankyou note. This entire epistle may be an extended Thankyou note.

Paul is in these verses expressing his gratitude to the Philippians for their generosity to him and for taking him to heart. Remember also that while Paul is expressing his gratitude he is not doing so because he felt a certain sense of desperation. *I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me* (vv. 12,13).

But then he goes on to say *Notwithstanding* – in spite of the fact that I can do all things through Christ you Philippians have well done that ye did communicate with my affliction. And in the verses that follow Paul goes on explain why their offering to him was a sacrifice acceptable and well pleasing to God (v. 18). I want to focus this morning on this sacrifice of the Philippians that was acceptable and well pleasing to God. And I want to focus on it so that we might imitate the Philippians by offering our own sacrifices, so to speak, that also may be acceptable and well pleasing to God.

You could say that my desire for each of you here this morning is the same as Paul's desire for the Philippians. What was his desire for them? *I desire fruit that may abound to your account* – v. 17. Isn't that a good desire for a Preacher or Pastor to desire for the people under his care? I desire fruit that may abound to your account. Out of that desire, then, consider with me this morning:

The Well-Doing of Communicating with the Affliction of Others

What I want to do in our analysis this morning is to raise and then answer 3 questions: Who are the Afflicted that we Communicate with? How do we communicate with them? And Why is such Communication well pleasing to God?

I. Who are the Afflicted?

Paul is, of course, making reference to himself in our text but he's making reference to himself in the particular circumstances he was experiencing at that time. This is why he makes reference to his affliction – *ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction*. By now I'm sure you know that Paul was in prison for the cause of Christ. He had been apprehended by the Jews who would have killed him but the Romans rescued him and kept him in protective custody.

And in the course of his court appearances the Jews plotted to kill him again which in the end forced him to appeal to Caesar. His treatment had been unjust and his imprisonment was unfair. And while he was allowed to have visitors he wasn't allowed to do what he had been doing since his conversion which was to preach the gospel far and wide, leading souls to Christ and establishing churches. This unjust treatment is what constituted his affliction.

You're aware, I'm sure, of the other places in the New Testament that speak of his affliction, most notably 2Cor. 11. You heard read in your hearing this morning a chapter that we're going to look at this afternoon. 2Cor. 4 in which he also gives a description of

his affliction in vv. 8,9: *We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.* I love the description of these verses because they present a vivid picture of Paul's affliction but also show the limits that the effects of these afflictions had on him. He could describe himself as troubled, he would go so far as to admit that he was perplexed. He states that he was persecuted and that in the midst of these things he could be cast down.

But on the other hand though he was troubled there was a limit to the effect of that trouble so he might be troubled but not distressed. He was might be perplexed but his perplexity could not bring him to the point that he was in despair. And even though he was persecuted, he was not forsaken, certainly not forsaken by Christ though he was forsaken by others that named the name of Christ. And while he was cast down he couldn't be so downcast as to be destroyed. These verses graphically illustrate that reality of affliction while also demonstrating the persevering quality of faith.

The point I want to make, however, is that when it comes to identifying those that are the afflicted ones, we need not restrict the application to Christian leaders that are imprisoned for their faith. We do, of course, want to remember them and want to communicate with them in their affliction. They certainly are afflicted and in a sense we may consider ourselves fortunate that in many ways we aren't able to identify with that kind of affliction.

But affliction itself is something that every Christian experiences in varying forms. The word *affliction* is often translated by the word *tribulation*. Christ himself used this very word when he made a prediction that could be taken as a promise. Joh 16:33 *These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*

So affliction is a common Christian experience. Think about it for a moment – how often do the authors of the New Testament epistles address their epistles to those that are afflicted? Paul is making reference to his own affliction in our text but very often he's the one to communicate to others in their afflictions.

1Thess. 1:5,6 *For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. 6 And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost.*

The same with Peter: 1Peter 1:3-7 *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: 7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of*

gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

The same with James: James 1:1-3 *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting 2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.*

When you see, then, how broadly the application can be made in terms of who the afflicted ones are then it becomes apparent that the well doing of communicating with the afflicted can be applied to Christians in general. But especially should the communication toward Christians be made during the times of their afflictions. Paul does not say that the Philippians had done well simply in communicating with him but that they had done well in communicating with him in his affliction.

A ready illustration of this communication can be found in the book of Job. I know that Job's friends are regarded by Job as being miserable comforters and it is unfortunate that they turned out to be just that but on the other hand they could certainly be commended for taking the time to set their businesses in order and free their schedules in such a way that they would go to Job with the intention of comforting him. I guess they could be regarded as a group of friends whose intentions were commendable but whose execution of their intentions was deplorable.

Be that as it may – we do well to communicate with our afflicted brethren especially during the time of their affliction. And don't we know that during such times of affliction we seem to gain the ability to be charitable to a much greater degree. Secondary issues don't seem to get in our way when our brethren are undergoing times of affliction. It's only during times of ease that we feel the liberty to magnify secondary issues and treat other Christians as if they're heretics and apostates.

If we're going to do well, then, in communicating with others in affliction we must understand who the ones are to whom we should communicate. But let me next raise the question of how –

II. How are We to Communicate with Others in Their Affliction?

In the case of the Philippians they communicated with Paul's affliction by taking an offering for him and sending it to him through Epaphroditus. Listen again to the words of v. 18 *But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.*

This is something very simple and very practical and yet there's an irony to this statement in that despite its practical simplicity it would seem that such communication was either rare or other churches were slower to catch on to it. Look at the way Paul reflects on the matter in vv. 15,16 *Now ye Philippians know also, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as*

concerning giving and receiving, but ye only. 16 For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity. You see what I mean about this simple and practical matter being so rare? The Church at Philippi, at least early on, was the only church engaged in the practice of contributing to the Apostle Paul's ministry by contributing to his needs.

It's easy, isn't it, when it comes to such a ministry to make the assumption that others will take care of it or that the Lord himself will take care of it. It becomes easy to overlook the truth that the Lord uses his people to take care of his people. This kind of thinking was and is widespread enough for James to address the matter in his epistle and to address it as a matter of faith. So he asks the question in James 2:14 *What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? 17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.*

James is describing a contrast in these verses between "well-wishers" and doers of the word. And he makes it very plain, doesn't he, that faith follows through; faith gets beyond well-wishing and leads to deeds. I think you could say that the entire purpose of James epistle is to contrast pure religion with vain religion. So he writes what may be taken as the key verse to his epistle in 1:27 *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, [and] to keep himself unspotted from the world.* John addresses the same matter in his first epistle. 1Jo 3:18 *My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.*

Paul again addresses the issue when writing to the Corinthians. Notice how he calls on them to follow through in 2Co 8:11 *Now therefore perform the doing [of it]; that as [there was] a readiness to will, so [there may be] a performance also out of that which ye have.* May the Lord help us to take such simple and practical matters to heart. So we communicate to the afflictions of others the way the Philippians did by being mindful of the needs of those in affliction.

I am grateful for every simple and practical manifestation of faith I see in the church. I think, for example, of the ministry that Heidi Zartmann has taken upon herself in creating note cards and selling them and sending the proceeds to the persecuted church. This is actually a more involved ministry than many of us realize but it sure can be a simple and practical matter to purchase some of her cards in order to communicate with the affliction of some of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But let me answer the question of how to communicate with those in affliction in another perhaps even more basic way. We communicate with those in affliction by making sure we identify with them. This applies especially to our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ. So in Heb 13:3 we're told to: *Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; [and] them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.*

We are to be with them in spirit who are in heavy times of adversity or affliction. As members of the same body we hurt when they hurt just as we joy when they rejoice. And we are to never ever be ashamed of them. Paul makes a point of this when he refers to Onesiphorus in 2Ti 1:16 *The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus; for he oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain.*

Earlier in that same chapter of 2Tim. Paul exhorts Timothy: 2Ti 1:8 *Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God.* So we communicate with our brethren in their affliction by identifying with them and never being ashamed of them. This will, of course, move us to pray for them and to minister to them in practical ways.

I'm reminded of the time when Ian Paisley was in prison in Ulster for the stand he had taken against the downgrade of the Irish Presbyterian Church. It was during his stay in prison that Dr. Bob Jones Jr. came to visit him and BJU through Dr. Jones Jr. actually conferred an honorary doctorate on Ian Paisley while he was in prison. There were some in later years who wondered how Dr. Paisley could keep such close ties to a man and an institution that was at such variance with him in terms of doctrine and there were some that tried to drive a wedge between Bob Jones and Ian Paisley over the issue of Calvinism or over the issue of the KJV. One very simple explanation for the close tie between Bob Jones and Ian Paisley had to do with the way Bob Jones Jr. communicated with Ian Paisley in his affliction.

So there are ways – practical ways and spiritual ways in which we can and should communicate with the afflictions of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Let me make the point again that those in affliction aren't merely those that are persecuted for their faith. Those that mourn the loss of loved ones are in affliction; those that are experiencing oppressive circumstances in their businesses or in their jobs are in affliction. Those that are wrestling with doubts and fears and struggling for assurance are in affliction. We must be careful not to be too restrictive when it comes to identifying those in affliction.

So we've seen who they are and we've considered how to communicate with them. Let me raise one more question which I hope will serve to motivate you to communicate with those in affliction. The question is this:

III. Why is Such Communication Wellpleasing to the Lord?

Notwithstanding Paul writes in our text in v. 14 *ye have well done.* There donation to him is further described in v. 18 as *an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.* So there's no doubt about the fact that their communication was wellpleasing to God. But why? Why are such communications wellpleasing to God?

We may gain a clue to the answer to this question by looking at the way Paul describes their offering in v. 18. Their offering was *an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.* Paul is making reference in this terminology to those Old

Testament sacrifices that were either accompanied with the sweet smell of incense, or the offerings themselves were called by Moses time and again *a sweet savour unto the LORD*. Those offerings, we know, point to Christ. And that's the point in our text in Philippians. Our offerings point to Christ. We don't offer animal sacrifices but we do offer the praise of our lips and we do offer ourselves and our service.

In Heb 13:16 we read: *But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased*. And could it be that God is wellpleased with such sacrifices because he sees Christ-likeness in such sacrifices. We know through the gospel that Christ is all our merit. We don't sacrifice in order to earn anything but we sacrifice because in Christ we've freely received everything. 2Co 8:9 *For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich*.

He communicated with us in our affliction. And I think it would be true to say that apart from Christ our lives in sin could be described as times of affliction. We were scourged by our conscience which testified to our guilt and like the Jews we did the deeds of our father, the devil. We were in the service of the prince of the power of the air who did all he could to keep us blind and keep us under his dominion.

And in this condition Christ communicated to us. He commanded the light of his glory to shine in our darkened hearts and he brought us out of prison. I like the John Wesley describes the salvation process in the 4th stanza in our hymnbook of that hymn *And Can It Be?*

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Christ came and visited us in our affliction. We find him doing the same thing in the book of Acts. He visits Peter in prison; He visits Paul in prison. He shows his glory to Stephen and stands to greet him when Stephen is being stoned to death. Today Christ has committed that task to his people and God is wellpleased with his people when they communicate with each other in their affliction because such communication shows conformity to his Son and God is pleased with his Son and with that therefore that resembles his Son.

So that's one reason why God is wellpleased with such communication. Another reason Christ is wellpleased with such communication is because he views such communication as being service rendered directly to him. {**cf. Mt. 25:31-40**}.

This is how closely Christ identifies with you and with me. Such is our union with him that our communication to other Christians in their afflictions is service to Christ. The same holds true toward those that afflict or deprive the people of God. That passage in Mt. 25 goes on to describe those who failed to minister to Christ and you know also that when Paul was still Saul of Tarsus and wreaked havoc on the church Christ informed him on the Damascus road that he, Saul, was viewed as persecuting Christ himself.

There is good reason, therefore, to communicate with our brethren in their affliction. It is Christ-like to do so and it is service that Christ views as rendered directly to him. I wonder this morning as we bring this service to a close – is God wellpleased with you in this regard? Can it be said of you that you've ministered to Christ? May there indeed be a following through with good intentions that have been in the intentions category for too long.

My Mother in law was with us this past week. On one of the days we went to lunch at Cracker Barrel and she bought me something from the gift store. It's a photograph that captures a silhouette of a number of young people in cowboy attire sitting on a fence watching a man breaking in a horse. The photographer evidently has a desire to capture that which still resembles the cowboy life of the old west. And though I'm not exactly sure what kind of connection exists between that picture and the heading assigned to it – the heading says: The Best Sermons are Lived, not Preached.

She evidently was a little reluctant to give it to me for fear of offending me. If, after all the best sermons are lived, not preached, then what good is a man who preaches sermons? I'm not the least bit offended by the picture or the saying. Because the best preached sermons will lead to lived out sermons. One is suppose to lead to the other.

That is certainly the case with this message this morning. This is a sermon that needs to be lived. And the way we live it is by following the example of how the Philippians lived out the gospel that had been preached to them by Paul. May it be said of you and of me that we have well done in that we have communicated with Christians in their affliction. It occurs to me that there is a right way and a wrong way to receive such a sermon as this.

Some people may take such a study as use it as a means to criticize their brethren. Why doesn't anybody communicate with me? Why doesn't anybody know what I'm going through and reach out to me? You're asking the wrong question. Indeed that kind of question reveals the common malady of narcissism that is all too common in our day. The question you need to ask is how can I communicate to others in their affliction? The thing you need to pray is – Lord help me to see and know about others in their affliction and help me to communicate with them.