

The Call To Courage And Humility

by Steve Zeisler

Do you have a new commitment, a new direction set for yourself for the New Year? Having lived through 1981 you have had the opportunity to evaluate the old year, but what will this coming year be like for you? What will you say about it when you reflect upon it twelve months hence?

Let us consider a passage from the letter to the Philippians which will serve as a challenge for us as we begin the New Year. In these verses, Paul is directing his readers to take the high road in terms of their behavior and their way of life. This is a call to live Christianly, despite the many obstacles confronting them. In verse 27 of chapter 1 we find the central thought of the passage which runs from that verse through verse 18 of chapter 2:

Only [or, this is of supreme importance] conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . .

Commitment to and enthusiasm for the gospel of Christ is the theme which runs throughout the book of Philippians. Paul and his readers were committed to participate in the gospel, and because they were so committed, we find that the apostle returns again and again to that basic theme.

In the section 1:12 through 1:26, Paul is speaking about his imprisonment in Rome, and he says, "My circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel." Then, turning his attention to the Philippians, he says, "I want your conduct, your manner of life, to be worthy of the great message with which you have been entrusted. Live a life which will adorn the message of salvation in Christ."

Throughout this section, Scripture makes a number of appeals to us to act Christianly. Verse 29:

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake.

It is an honor to be a Christian. In a world that is in opposition to the gospel, it is an honor to take a stand for Christ, even though it will mean suffering.

In chapter 2, verses 1 and 2, we are told:

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of one mind . . .

Paul is appealing to us to have a sense of gratitude for what God has done for us. If we are responsive to the gifts we have been given, then we ought to act that way by humility and commitment toward one another.

Verse 12:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you . . .

There is another reason for Christian behavior. We should have a sense of awesome respect for God because it is he himself who is at work in us.

Verse 15 suggests another reason why we ought to live Christianly:

. . . you appear as lights in the world . . .

Here the appeal is to the beauty, the glory, that goes along with Christlike behavior. Such conduct makes us attractive; it sets us apart, so that we appear as shining lights in a dark and corrupt world.

Finally, Paul appeals to the love which the Philippians had for him. Verse 16:

hold fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

"It will give me a sense of reassurance and confidence if you will act as you ought to act," Paul tells them.

So there are several bases for motivation to act Christianly: Honor, gratitude, fear, a love of beauty, and a way of honoring those who have led us and whom we appreciate in Christ.

We are going to look at the first two of these appeals in some detail this morning. In the opening two paragraphs there is an appeal to the Philippians to let their conduct be worthy of the gospel.

Chapter 1, verse 27:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents- which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ s sake' not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me. If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...

The first paragraph, verses 27 through 30, reveals that we are participants in a battle. The word that is translated "opponent" in verse 28 is in other places in Scripture translated "enemy." That word is used of Satan; and it is used of the Antichrist at another point. We are in a serious battle, a spiritual war. But those who are part of the confrontation should not be "alarmed" by the opposition, Paul says. We should not be frightened or terrified.

The passage suggests to us that this war is a fight to the finish. There will be no ties in this game; it will not be called off due to lack of interest; one side or the other will be left standing at the end. So the commandment to us is, "Hold your ground; stand firm against the opposition; live as you ought to live in your sphere of influence."

Because he commands us to live this way, Paul is implying that it is possible to fail, that we can turn tail and run. But the other possibility is raised here also. "If we stand firm," Paul says, "it is 'a sign of destruction' for the enemy." If we are the kind of people we ought to be, then those in the world who oppose the Lord will be faced with their own destruction

Insecurity is the modern psychological term for fear. Have you ever felt insecure, undefended, shaky, uncertain of yourself? The areas in which you feel most insecure, most vulnerable, are those you ought to look to for spiritual attack. Recognize those as the areas where you will have difficulty standing firm and living as you ought to live.

It would be easy for us to picture this battle if it were fought in the way the military took over in Poland recently, for instance. If Communist soldiers marched down our street s and put a knife to our neck it would be quite clear who our enemy is and where we should stand. In the debate over national political questions,

such as abortion on demand, the possibility of an out-of control arms race, etc., it is also quite clear where we ought to take our stand. But what are our own personal insecurities, where do we feel most vulnerable in terms of our own sphere of influence- our home, our neighborhood, our job, where we are called to live for Christ's sake?

Two areas occur to me. The first concerns material possessions. We are experiencing a growing recession in this country which is frightening to anyone whose job is shaky. If we allow ourselves to give way to our insecurity in this area we will find ourselves willing to sell out our Christian conduct. If I find myself becoming dishonest, hard, driving, or thoughtless of others so that I may achieve a certain standard of living, then I will sell out the cause of Christ; I will sell out my family, the church, my ministry, my friends in Christ. If I am insecure about whether or not God will provide for me then I am vulnerable; I will not be able to stand firm at that point.

We may also feel insecure in social matters. We all love to be approved of. It is risky, for instance, to have friends from the gay underworld, or friends who are in prison, or to have poor and uneducated friends visit our homes. We are tempted to worry about what those around us will think. If we are insecure in this area we are vulnerable to attack. We will treat people the way the world treats them.

I asked a young student who lives in my neighborhood what she wanted for Christmas, and she replied, "Clothes." It struck me that in a number of conversations I had with teenagers the term, "designer clothes," came up. These very expensive outfits which have some designer's name on them are the most desirable things imaginable for kids of that age.

An incident during our Junior High and High School students' retreat week last summer made an impression on me. A girl in the group had cut an alligator patch out of her shirt-- one of the prized designer symbols-- stuck a diaper pin through it and pinned it on whatever she was wearing at the moment, whether it was an old, faded T-- shirt, a bathing suit, whatever. What she was doing was thumbing her nose at the proposition that one should look up to people because they wear some designer's name on their bottom. It is unChristian to grant standing and honor to people because of what they own, what they wear, what kind of car they drive, what style they promote. If we are insecure about our standing in others' eyes, if we need their approval, then we are vulnerable to the fear of having social approval taken away and we will not stand firm. These are areas in which we should ask ourselves hard questions.

In 1 Peter, the apostle has words of advice about social interaction with non -- Christians and the pressures we face to compromise:

You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do -- living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. (1 Pet. 4:3-4)

People think it is strange that you will not join them in their behavior and they abuse you for that. The call to conduct worthy of the gospel means that we cannot give way to insecurity or fear at such pressures; we must stand firm.

Scripture says to do so "is honorable." It is a positive gift of God that you have opportunity to suffer abuse for your standing in Christ. It may cost you something-- there may well be suffering involved-- but it is a gracious gift of God, granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but to suffer for his sake. So rather than trying to avoid suffering, we ought to look at it as a badge of honor.

A group of us, led by the great mountain man in our midst, Paul Winslow, climbed a rock face in the Sierras last summer. There was an easy route to the summit, or you could work your way up the cliff face. Some in the group were good athletes; some were not. Some had had rock-climbing experience; some had not. But everybody made it to the top because we encouraged one another. Those who had reached the top told others where the foot-- holds were, they cheered others on, etc. It was an honor, a valuable experience, to have gone through the skinned knees, the pressure, the fear, whatever it took to get to the summit. Anybody could have

made it up the easy way, but to have risen to the challenge and done it the hard way brought with it a great sense of recognition and honor.

That is exactly the appeal Paul is making here. We are called on to suffer, to be different, to be abused, to live with material insecurity in our life, to give of ourselves. That is honorable; that is an appointment from God himself, so be grateful. On that basis we are instructed to live differently, to "conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. "

The second paragraph which we will look at this morning is verses 1 through 5 of chapter 2. The issue here is not how we relate to those outside the faith who are attacking us, but, how do we relate to one another in the family of God? How do we maintain a strong unity with one another? How do we live humbly before one another?

The basis of this appeal is not the honor which is involved, but a grateful recognition of how much we have been given. We should live humbly, as servants toward each other in Christ, because we have been given so much in the Lord. "If you've been encouraged by Christ, if there is any consolation of love, any fellowship of the Spirit, any affection and compassion bestowed on you by the Lord, then make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose."

Jesus appealed to the same logic when he spoke to Simon about ingratitude. (Luke 7) He who is forgiven little loves little, Jesus said. How we treat others is a true measure of our sense of having been blessed by God. If we regard ourselves as having been forgiven little, then we will be stingy in our forgiveness of others. But if we recognize how much we have been forgiven, how much it cost God on our behalf, then we will be generous in our giving and in our treatment of others. Has God done anything for you? The proper response is for us to be givers toward one another.

Three commandments in this section serve to flesh out the call to live with humility and in commitment to one another. The first has to do with how we think; the second with how we act; the third with an underlying attitude that supports all of our behavior, and that is humble -- heartedness. Verse 3 says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind . . . regard one another as more important than yourself." That is how we are to think about each other.

Scripture recognizes that everybody regards himself highly. To take our own side in an argument comes very naturally to us. To feel sorry for the wrongs we have suffered comes very naturally to us. All of us think of ourselves as important, but we have to be trained to think of others as more important than ourselves. Someone made a comment once which betrays the attitude of the human heart in this regard: "All I really want is a fair advantage over others," he said. This kind of thinking comes naturally to us, but the commandment here is to change that by learning to regard others as more important than ourselves.

Paul tells us to act differently also. Verse 4: "do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others," he says. That is, step into others' shoes, see life from their perspective, take their interests to heart. I have a problem here because the closest I get to this line of reasoning usually is to think, "If I were that person, here is what I would want"; the I would act or not act on that proposition.

But Paul is saying something more profound than that. He is saying, "What are others' interests? What are the needs they feel? What does life look like from their point of view? Take time to get into their shoes. Feel their hurt, take on their burdens, the baggage that comes with all their years of experience." The apostle says, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others"-- the things that matter to other people.

Finally, we read that we need to have Jesus' attitude underlying both our thinking and our actions. Verses 6 through 11 of chapter 2 describe the humility of Christ, his willingness to give up everything, to become a man, and to die a criminal's death on a cross. In these verses we are told at least by implication, that the reason Jesus could do that is that he trusted his Heavenly Father to take care of him. God highly exalted him, we are told. The Lord knew that somebody else would look out for him, therefore he was free to give up his rights, to think about other people, and to act on their behalf.

That is the attitude that will set us free to live this way. If we really believe that God will take care of us, that our Heavenly Father loves us and will meet our needs, that he will defend us and support us and exalt us at the proper time, then we are free to stop thinking about ourselves. We will let go of the protective sense we all have to defend ourselves and we will begin to serve others. Christ's attitude will set us free to be humble--hearted in our interaction with one another in the body of Christ.

A final theme that runs through all these verses is that we cannot do any of this on our own. We need one another in order to live courageously and humbly in the family of God. In verse 27 Paul says, "I want to hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." And in verse 2 he says, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." Scripture does not tell us to make a New Year's resolution and then set our jaws to change by our personal effort the bad habits we have accumulated over the years. We have got to do this together; this is not a one- man project. If we are going to learn humility, we've got to learn it together.

Paul very beautifully uses himself as an example in this regard, in verse 30; and he uses Christ as an example in vs.5-11 of chapter 2. "I'm your older brother," he is saying, in effect, in verse 30. "I'm calling on you to suffer, but I want you to know that I've been through it first ('experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me')." He tells the Philippians how to live, then he offers himself as an example of someone whom they can observe and learn from. It is this kind of "Let's do it together" attitude that makes all the difference in this passage.

As Christians we are called on to conduct ourselves in -- manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. That conduct includes courage enough to stand firm, and it includes humility, a servant-hearted attitude towards one another. We will only achieve this if we all join one another in it.

Our Father, thank you for the beauty of this season, and for this reminder of the humility of our Lord. What a great example to us he is. We pray that we can be examples to one another, that we can help one another and support one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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