

A Life Worthy of the Gospel

Philippians 2:27-3:13
David H. Roper

As we turn again to the book of Philippians perhaps it would be helpful to go back through the opening verses of chapter 1 to refresh our thinking and catch up on Paul's argument to this point.

He begins the letter with a brief introduction and then a word of appreciation for his own memories of the Philippians and of their willingness to participate with him in the gospel. They had demonstrated their love for Paul in every tangible way by supplying him with financial help during his missionary journeys, and so he writes to express his appreciation for this. He is confident that God is going to continue the work that he has begun in their lives. He sees in their actions the marks of genuine faith, and he realizes that God is at work to perfect the process that he has begun. So, on the basis of that confidence, he prays that their love may abound.

Then he turns from this note of thanksgiving to a word about his own circumstances. He tells them that, far from being an impediment, his imprisonment has really caused the gospel to spread. They were perhaps frightened that the apostle Paul was in prison and that the thrust of the gospel would now be blunted. But Paul says, "Quite the contrary. My imprisonment actually has resulted in the furtherance of the gospel. It has caused the gospel to progress throughout the praetorian guard." These picked, choice elite young men of the Roman Empire were chained to the Apostle as guards. They were discovering Jesus Christ to be the one they needed, and they were sharing the gospel with their friends. Thus it was spreading right in Caesar's household, the very center of Rome, the most strategic place.

Furthermore, the church in Rome was beginning to break silence. They sensed that if Paul could speak out in the particular situation in which he found himself they certainly could in theirs. So they were beginning to do so, "Some indeed," Paul says, "from their own motives, but it doesn't really matter because the gospel is spreading, and in that I rejoice."

Next he mentions a dilemma in his own thinking. It is, essentially, that he would like to depart and go to be with the Lord, that it would really be to his advantage if he were beheaded because he would step right into the presence of his Lord - and yet it was more advantageous for the church in Philippi that he remain behind. He realizes that his work is not yet complete. God is not through with him so he knows that he will have to remain behind.

Now in verse 27 he comes to a new thought. He turns from his memories and his circumstances to their conduct:

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . .

The word "only," with which this section begins, denotes essentiality. He is saying that this is something absolutely necessary. This is important. If you don't do anything else, at least do this. This is the first order of business, the first priority; "Conduct yourselves worthy of the gospel." The term translated "conduct yourselves" in the New American Standard Version means, literally, "behave as citizens." It is from the same Greek root used in chapter 3, verse 20, where Paul says, ". . . our citizenship is in heaven."

This would have a great deal of meaning to the people in Philippi because they held status as Roman citizens which very few cities enjoyed. It was the practice of the Roman authorities to establish centers of Roman military might and law and culture and learning throughout the empire. It was by means of these garrisons that the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome, was maintained. Philippi was one of these cities which had been granted status as a Roman city. It was like a little Rome. The people who lived there were Roman citizens and had all the attendant rights and privileges. They were expected therefore to live out their lives in this pagan society as

Romans. They were not to deny their citizenship, nor were they to do anything which would conflict with it or contradict it, but they were to confirm it.

So Paul takes this figure and applies it to their new lives in Christ. "Live out your life in the world as a citizen of the kingdom of God. Walk worthy of the gospel that is yours. Live out the name of Jesus Christ in the world. Make true in your experience what is true in your inner life. Make the truth incarnate, Conduct yourself as worthy of the gospel of Christ.⁹ Now, that is a message which was needed in the first century, and it is a message which is needed today right here in Palo Alto. We too have the same commission to conduct ourselves as citizens of heaven, to act as we know the King would have us act.

We live in a society where there are no longer any widely recognized standards, any categories, anything by which the people can judge the rightness or wrongness of acts. Everything is a big question mark. So how important it is, in a world like this, that we I've lives which provide answers, which show truth incarnate in our own lives and experiences!

There is a cartoon strip making the rounds in underground newspapers which is drawn by a counterculture cartoonist. Robert Crumb, who is responsible for Fritz the Cat, the X-rated animated movie cartoon which I'm sure most of you have seen advertised. The cartoon strip features a character called Mr. Natural. In one of the sequences a young man comes to Mr. Natural and asks, "Is sex the answer?" Mr. Natural replies, "My boy, sex is the question!" His point is that among young people today sex is the great enigma. They don't understand it. They can't stay away from it, but they don't have any standards for understanding it. They don't have any divine dimensions by which to put it in its proper setting, and so it bothers them and frustrates them and fails to satisfy them. It is probably the single biggest hang-up among counterculture young people and young people in general.

If I could describe the world scene today it would be with a great big question mark hanging over all of life. Where are the categories that can be used to define life? What is right and what is wrong? No one knows. Therefore, how important it is, in a world like this, for us to live lives of integrity and truth, and to display to the world of the character of Jesus Christ, to live out the character of the name we bear.

There is a story of Alexander the Great which sounds a little apocryphal to me, but is interesting nevertheless. A young man in the Greek army was accused of being derelict in his duty. His commanding officer told Alexander of this young man's activities. Alexander asked his name and the commander responded, "His name is Alexander." Alexander the Great replied angrily, "Tell at young man to change his behavior or change his name!"

In a sense that is what we are faced with. If we bear the name of Jesus Christ then we need to reflect the character of Jesus Christ in the world. If we don't reflect the character of Christ then we have no right to bear his name. We are to live as citizens of the kingdom of God in a pagan world which desperately needs to see truth embodied in people. And that is Paul's word to us.

He moves from the general to the specific in the last part of verse 27:

. . . so that whether I come and see you or remain absent I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit [Spirit], with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . .

He points out two aspects of unity. The first is a firm stand in the Spirit - the holy Spirit. The "S" should be capitalized. In chapter 4, verse I, Paul exhorts them to stand firm in the Lord. This is the same principle. You see, our unity comes from the Spirit of God. We don't create it, we don't organize it into being. The unity is already ere. It is there because we belong to the Spirit of God. And we look around in the body of Christ, at the other members of the body . . . we may not like it, but we are one with then). There is really nothing we can do about that. We certainly don't have to work in order to construct that unity. Our responsibility is to live out the unity which is already there.

So Paul says, first, "Take a firm stand in the one Spirit." We don't have many spirits, many christs. As Paul

says in his first letter to Corinth, "Christ is not divided." Christ doesn't say one thing to you and another to me, things which are contradictory. We have one Spirit, one Lord. He has already created the unity. Our responsibility is to take a firm stand in the unity that is already ours.

And then Paul says that, having taken that stand, we are to strive together for the faith of the gospel. He doesn't mean that we are to strive with each other but that we are to strive in unison. I suspect that Paul is evoking here the figure of a Greek or Roman phalanx. I did a little reading on this subject last week, and I was interested to learn that it was by means of the phalanx that Philip of Macedon was able to unite the Greek city states and that it was this particular military formation which Alexander the Great used to bring Persia to its knees. The Roman army had adopted this formation in its own warfare. They took about 250 soldiers and formed them into a block with close files and deep ranks. The first five ranks extended their spears, which were fourteen feet long, and the others rested their spears on the shoulders of the men in front of them. This imposing array of weaponry moved in unison against the enemy, and it was overwhelming. It would take the heart out of anyone who saw the phalanx approaching.

Our weapons, of course, are different. "Our weapons are not carnal, but they are mighty through God in the pulling down of strongholds," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians. But Paul's point is that we are to move together as a unit in our proclamation of the gospel. We are to stand fast. We are not to break ranks. The phalanx could only be broken up if one soldier, out of fear of the enemy, would drop his spear and run. Then all would fall. So they had to stand together united. We are to live in unity and harmony with one another. We are to live out our lives worthy of the gospel by walking together, expressing together the life of the one Spirit, without dissection, without bitterness, without strife, or anything else which would disintegrate, splinter, and fragmentize the body.

Paul says that the result of this united stand is that we are . . .

. . . in no way alarmed by your opponents hid is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that, too, from God.

When people on the outside observe Christians living in this way, their reaction is; "There must be something supernatural about those people." This is because the normal response to oppression and conflict is that relationships eventually begin to disintegrate, even though they may stand fast for a while. I have seen this happen so frequently on the Stanford campus. If a group is repressed and persecuted there is, for a while, a cohesive stand. But then the group begins to break up because bitterness and resentment builds among the members. It is directed initially against their oppressors, but then it displays itself within the group and they can't get along, and so the pressure ultimately fragments that group.

But where a group of believers stand together, where they take a firm stand in the Spirit of God and let the Spirit work out that unity in their lives, it is a clear sign to the world that there is something supernatural at work in those lives. The world is alerted to the fact that God is alive and is working in people's lives. That is why Jesus prayed that the church might be one, so that the world would believe that he came from the Father. It is a part of our mission as a church that when we act as one, then the world believes. When we don't act as one, then the world says, "That is just what I thought. There is nothing to it. Evangelism is not committed to individuals. It is committed to the body of Christ. It is when the body operates together in love and unity that the world is forced to pay attention. Paul says that this is a clear sign of their destruction but of our salvation. That is why in verses 29 and 30 Paul explains that suffering is part and parcel of our life in Jesus Christ:

For to you it has been granted [graciously given] for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for his sake . . .

God gives us the opportunity to believe. Faith comes from him, but suffering comes from him also, because it is when the church stands together in suffering that the world realizes there is something different about us. So we can expect suffering. It is something graciously given. It is not given only to us, but to the apostles as well:

. . . experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

Even the apostles were not excluded. Every member of the body of Christ will experience pressure and persecution because it is in that context that we are able to live out the life of Jesus Christ. "Therefore," Paul says, you see, "because it is so important that we stand together, because this is the key to the world's knowing the reality of the Christian message, therefore," Paul says in verse 2:

. . . make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same hope, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

The "therefore" in verse 1 actually belongs grammatically with verse 2. "Therefore, because this is the way the world will know of its destruction and of your salvation, therefore, be one, act as one. Have one love, act with one mind, with one soul, with one common purpose." Now that is quite a requirement! But that is the key to our mission in the world. Apart from a united stand by the church, the world will never know. And yet who of us can live in love with other members of the body of Christ? It is difficult in our own homes, if not impossible, It is difficult to live that way with our own child, if not impossible. The same can be said for our business associations if we work with other Christians. What then are we to do in order to live out this kind of life in the world? If it is absolutely essential, if we must do it, how do we do it? What are the incentives? It is these that Paul gives us in chapter 2. The first is found in verse 1:

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 . . .

The conjunction translated "if" here could better be translated "since" because it is not Paul's intention to suggest that these things might not really be true. He means, "If these things are true, and they are . . ." or "Since we have encouragement in Christ, etc., let's be e," He is speaking here of the resources that we have in Christ. The Scriptures reveal to us that we have everything we need to face into any problem which confronts us. We have everything in Christ that we need in order to obey any command which is given to us.

Augustine said, "Give us what you will and then bid us obey what you will." He was asking the Lord to provide all that he needed in order to face into all that the Lord required of him. And, of course, that is exactly what the Scriptures tell us is true. We have everything that we need in order to respond in obedience to the commands of Scripture. These resources were given to us the moment we invited Jesus Christ to be Lord. You don't have one thing more today than you had the first day you came into God's family. You may have learned to appropriate more of it, but you don't have anymore.

Ted Wise commented in a Bible study last week that he is constantly checking into his spiritual pockets to see what is there. That is what we must do. God fills our pockets with everything that we need and then, as we go out into the world we check our pockets to see what we have there that we can apply to the specific situations we find ourselves in.

I remember when I went off to school my mother used to pack a sack lunch for me, and she would always have a little surprise in there. It was always exciting when lunchtime would come around and I'd get hungry because then I would get to dig into that sack to discover what was there. I knew that there would be ample there to provide for my needs. And that is the way the Lord deals with our needs. He has already given us everything that we require. We simply need to lay hold of what is there.

I walked into the Palo Alto library the other day and I saw a young man sitting way back in the stacks in a dark corner, It struck me kind of funny when I saw what he was reading. Here was this man surrounded by all the wisdom of the ages and he was back there reading a comic book! But that is so often the way we respond to the Lord. We have all the resources we need but are operating on a comic book level. As Peter Marshall said, "We are like deep sea divers equipped to go fathoms deep, marching forth to pull plugs out of bathtubs!"

We have everything we need, all resources are ours in Christ, and Paul describes them for us. There is encouragement in Christ. Is that what you need today in order to face into a bitter situation in your home? The Greek word is one which means "one who moves in alongside to help". That is what the Lord does. He moves in alongside to encourage us. There is consolation of love, Paul says - the love of God the Father, love which

pervades the body of Christ as individuals move to meet our needs and to console us when we make monumental blunders, when we fail so dismally. There is always the consolation of love. There is the fellowship of the Spirit the sharing in common of all spiritual things, of the gifts that minister within the body, and of all that we share because we are one in the Spirit of God. And there is affection; inner affection and outer compassion - the Greek word means "taking up in pity."

All of these resources are ours in Christ and in his body - infinite resources which we can lay hold of in order to face into any difficult situation. I don't care how irascible, how difficult that other Christian person may be -- you can live in unity and love with him because you have, already, as a present possession, the resources of Jesus Christ himself. These provisions pervade the body. They are available to us. We don't need to go to Rome, nor Mecca, nor even Palo Alto to get them. We don't need a guru nor a psychiatrist. We have them in Christ. We can lay hold of them. They are ours. Everything that we need to equip us for all of life is in his word and in his life.

There is a second incentive which Paul gives us in verses 3 and 4:

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.

It struck me when I read this that Paul is putting his finger on the one issue which disintegrates the body. If you want to isolate one factor which destroys harmony, it is this self-seeking spirit, this desire to insist upon our own rights, to have our own way. If this is dealt with, then the body of Christ returns to heal I-h. In this regard it is somewhat like our human bodies. They will naturally return to health if we can somehow deal with the viruses and the infections, the malnourishment and the other problems which inhibit health. If we deal with those the body flourishes. The same is true of the body of Christ. When we (deal with these spiritual viruses the body returns to health.

Paul isolates the virus which causes the most damage. It is selfishness, pride. The Book of Proverbs says that only by pride comes contention. There is no way that I can excuse pride in my life. If there is conflict in my home, contention between me and my family, or if there is wrangling with my business associates, somewhere at the root of it is pride. I am insisting upon my rights or they are insisting upon theirs. It is only by foregoing our rights and in humility regarding others as more important than ourselves, and by not looking out for our own interests but looking out for the interests of others, that we are able to live in harmony. That is what Paul says. We are to deal with this stubborn tendency that we have to enthrone ourselves and to get our own way and do our own thing, to live as we want to live "After all, don't I have the right of privacy, and the right to acceptance, and the right to recognition?" Yes, I do. But if to insist upon those rights in a particular situation would cause distress and create disharmony, then I am to forego those rights and seek the interests of others, I am just to give them away.

That is such an incredible principle that Paul documents it from the example of Christ This is the third incentive - the life, the example of Jesus Christ himself, in verses 5 through 8;

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This is an amazing section of Scripture, perhaps one of the most sublime Christological sections in the New Testament. Theologians have long struggled with this passage and have never, never plumbed its depths. There is no one who ultimately understands what Paul is saying here. And yet there is truth here which even the simplest believer can grasp. Jerome, a fourth-century biblical scholar, said that the Bible is like a stream in which elephants must swim and lambs may wade. There is a depth which floats the heavyweights so that they

can't even touch bottom, and yet the most innocent, simple-minded believer can wade right through the Scriptures and discover truth there which is applicable to every situation.

That is the quality of Paul's point here. Although this is an extremely profound section dealing with the nature of Jesus Christ, Paul's major emphasis here is that Christ gave up his rights. He says that Jesus was at first existing in the form of God. The word translated "form" means "the outward expression of something which is essentially true inwardly". Jesus Christ was God. There is no question about it. He manifested outwardly the character of God. He had all the attributes of God. And yet he did not regard that equality with God a thing to be grasped, to be forcibly retained. That is, he didn't hang onto his rights to act independently as God. He could have. But he set that aside and became dependent upon the Father in the same way that you and I are.

That is why Jesus could say, in the days of his incarnation, "The words that I speak, the works that I do, they are of the Father I can do nothing of myself." He never acted as God. He was God but he never acted that way, out of his independent use of his deity. He always acted out of a sense of dependence upon God. He emptied himself, Paul says, taking the form of a bond-servant, and he was made in the likeness of men and was found in appearance as a man, and he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. There are two movements here: first the infinite becomes incarnate and then the incarnate becomes a slave. He subjected himself to the Father to the extent that he went to the cross-death. Paul's point is that he didn't have to die on the cross. He could have died at home in bed. He could have died a peaceful death. But he deliberately chose a crucifixion type of death. That was the extent of his humbling, his willingness to seek not his own interests but mine. He gave up his rights as God for me and for you.

In light of that you can see what is incentive means to us. The next time I'm tempted to cling to my rights, I need to remind myself that the Lord Jesus Christ himself gave up the ultimate right. There is no right which is any "righter". He was God, and yet he gave it all up - gave up his equality with God in the things of God in order to become a man. Now, what right do I have which is equal in importance to that? Is my right to privacy that much of a right? Is my right to have acceptance and love and recognition as necessary as that? No. There is no greater right than the right the Lord himself set aside.

Now, it is true that we are not to give up the rights of other people. Nor are we to give up what is right. There may be times when we will have to stand for what is right and thus cause conflict. James says, "The wisdom from above is first pure and then peaceable." There may be times when we will have to destroy peace for a period of time in order to maintain purity.

But I am never to stand for my rights when that will cause division. I may go to the brother who is oppressing me and point out what he is doing and try to negotiate with him. But ultimately, if he will not respond and if to insist upon my way would be to cause disunity, then I am to set that right aside. Whenever we are tempted to cling to our rights and to insist upon our own way we need to remember that the Lord himself gave up the ultimate right. It is only as we are willing to set aside our rights and to give for the interests of others, to begin to reach out to others and minister to their needs, to be concerned about the things that they are interested in, that we can maintain the unity of the body and thus fill the mission that God has given to us.

There is one final theme in this section. Verses 9 through 11 Paul says,

Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Where this translation says "he emptied himself" the King James version says "he made himself of no reputation." And yet this passage tells us that, after having submitted himself to the Father and having set aside his rights as God, the Father gave him back the reputation he first had. Wherever the name of Jesus is mentioned, men remember the kind of man he was. His name is honored. He has a good name among those who are looking for the truth. Although Paul doesn't develop this theme, because this isn't the major incentive and it is not the line of argument he is pursuing, it is true that when we are willing to set aside our rights God will exalt us. When we are willing to be of no reputation and not to insist on our rights God will honor us. He will

make our name good. He will give us the honor that comes from him.

Paul's conclusion is found in verses 12 and 13. He writes,

So then, my beloved [because we have all these incentives - the resources in Christ, the particular thing pointed out which breaks up the unity of the body, and the example of Jesus Christ himself] **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, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.**

That verse is very confusing to many people because they think that Paul is referring to the necessity of good works that it is the good works which produce salvation. But when you see it in its context you can understand what Paul is saying. He is talking about this particular kind of salvation -- the working out of our unity in a world where we are faced with every kind of obstacle and deterrent to unity, and where people are going to resist us and we will be swimming upstream when we try to live together in love and in harmony. We need to work out our salvation in that kind of situation.

Again, there are three tenses of salvation in the Scriptures. In some instances salvation is looked upon as past our deliverance from sin and its penalty in our life, i.e., our justification. There is the present tense of salvation - God is working out the process of conforming us to Jesus Christ. That is an ongoing process taking place right now. And there is the future tense of salvation - our ultimate glorification.

It is this second tense, the present tense, which Paul is talking about here -- the process of sanctification which God is now working out in our lives. And Paul says, "Work it out -- right now. Stop defeating yourselves. Stop insisting upon your rights. Stop doing the things which create disharmony and destroy the unity of the body of Christ. Work it out now, because it is God who is at work in your life both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Underneath are the everlasting arms. Within is the Spirit of God working out in his body the truth of this passage." And we can work with confidence, with peace, and with certainty, because we know that God is at work to produce the very thing he has asked in our lives.

Father, what a wonderful thing it is to know that we can live together in love, that we can be harmonious and unified, and can accept one another and love one another and thus live without friction and discord in the body of Christ. We thank you that you have given us that life, and that we can appropriate it. Lord, I pray for all of us that, if there are areas of our lives where we are unwilling to put aside our rights and to live for the interests of others, you will point them out to us in the very gracious way in which you work, will put your finger right on them and won't let us escape until we are willing to judge them and put them away, and thus we can be in our homes and our businesses and our schools, wherever we are, the kind of citizens who exemplify the character of the King. We thank you, Father, that you are going to do this, in Christ's name, Amen.

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