

Catching Joy ~ A Study Of Philippians

Week 3 ~ Philippians 1:27-2:11

We could say that Paul always had two great concerns, two main objectives: First, that people would come to know Jesus. This is why he spent his life going from town to town sharing the gospel with whoever would listen. Second, that those who accepted the message, who believed in Jesus, would live in a way that was consistent with that belief. We could say that all his letters were primarily meant to address that second main objective. He wrote to people who had already placed their trust in King Jesus. His letters were meant to encourage them in this new life in Christ. Sometimes that encouragement took the form of advice or instructions, sometimes the form of challenge and correction. We see an example of Paul's concern in this statement, "*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*" (1:27)

Again, this is a consistent concern and theme in Paul's letters...

- "...I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received..." (Ephesians 4:1, emphasis added)
- "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way..." (Colossians 1:10, emphasis added)
- "...encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory." (I Thessalonians 2:12, emphasis added)
- "...we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of His calling..." (II Thessalonians 1:11, emphasis added)

It's important to see how these two objectives work together. The greatest evidence for the gospel, for the message of new life in Jesus, is a transformed life. Conversely, the greatest detriment or liability to the gospel are people who claim to believe/follow Jesus but whose lives are inconsistent with that. To say it another way, the credibility of the gospel is meant to be observed in the life of the Church...the believing community. The Church is meant to embody the message. The gospel is meant to be proclaimed AND demonstrated in the lives of those who believe it.

So Paul, as an individual, embodied the mission and purpose of the Church. "Advancing" the gospel, or making disciples, or however you want to say it, basically comes down to...

- People hearing and receiving the gospel
- People growing in maturity in Christ...the fruit of which is justice (life and relationships rightly ordered)

(These really are two sides of the same coin. Everything the Church does can/should fall into one of these buckets...which, again, are really one effort.)

What does such a "worthy" life look like? Much of the rest of the letter (and really all of Paul's letters) describes exactly that. Let's look at some of what that includes...

A “worthy” life looks like **unity** around Christ, “...stand firm in one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.” (1:27, emphasis added), “...being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” (2:2, emphasis added)

- *How much do people need to agree in order to have unity? (Or, how much can we disagree and still have unity?)*
- *What sort of things/issues do you think strain unity amongst Christians, congregations, denominations?*
- *What can we do to foster/cultivate unity between individual Christians, between congregations, between traditions/denominations?*
- *Describe an experience you’ve had where there was a true sense of oneness of spirit and purpose? What did it take to achieve that?*

A "worthy" life looks like **boldness** and **fearlessness** in the face of opposition, resistance, mistreatment, “...without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.” (1:28, emphasis added) and, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had...” (1:29-30, emphasis added)

There are realities of the Christian life that we often don’t talk about...namely, that faithfully following Jesus naturally, inherently, intrinsically puts us at odds with the surrounding world. It makes us different. Unfortunately, people don’t always treat others who are different from them very well. Sometimes people view followers of Jesus as a threat. Remember back to Acts 16 and the start of the Philippian church...how Paul and Silas were mistreated (stripped, beaten, imprisoned). This was not unique to Philippi. There is always a potential for faithful/obedient followers of Jesus to be persecuted. (Hmmm...and where no such hardship, struggle, persecution exists, it makes one wonder if people are truly being faithful and obedient.)

(Warning: I’m about to go off on a quick tangent.) It should be noted that the New Testament writers never seemed to have envisioned a time or circumstance when the Church would be anything other than a minority group, and thus marginalized. (Without reading too much into the Parable of the Sower/Soils—see Matthew 13—it seems that perhaps Jesus also expected the positive response to the gospel to be more of a minority response.) To say it another way, the writers of the New Testament didn’t seem to imagine a time when the Church was in a place of political power. But ever since Constantine, at least within Western Civilization, the Church/Christianity has been in a position of power, or at least in close proximity to power. As a result, at best this has been a mixed bag, at worst it has resulted in great corruption of the Church.

It is natural, instinctual to want to avoid pain and suffering. But the example we see in Jesus, and the invitation of Jesus, is to lean into pain and suffering on behalf of others. Along with that comes a relinquishing of power.

- *How is suffering a natural part and expectation of the Christian life? (Or, if you disagree with that, please make your case.)*
- *How have you seen or experienced suffering, opposition, hardship, adversity, ostracization/marginalization because of your faith? Is that what you expected? How did you respond? (If that has not been your experience, why do you think that is?)*

A “worthy” life looks like an **others-oriented** posture over a self-oriented posture. “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* (Philippians 2:3-4, emphasis added) This flies right in the face of “Look out for #1.”, doesn’t it? We live in a self-absorbed, self-obsessed culture/society. And truth be told, we’ve absorbed more of that “self-first” mentality than we’d like to admit. We could probably make the case that the greatest rival, the greatest idol, that competes with God in this world is the Self—both on an individual level and a collective-self level...ex. America First.

The way of Jesus trains us, or retrains us, to approach life differently...from a different posture and attitude. As we are secure in who we are in Christ (His beloved) and in His Kingdom, we can then navigate life differently...looking out for our neighbors near and far. Notice how the two great commandments, Love God and Love others, are outwardly focused. Love is, by definition, outward focused.

- *In what ways do you battle selfishness...or selfish ambition or vain conceit?*
- *How has following Jesus made you more others/outwardly focused? Or, what are you doing to practice or train in being more outwardly focused and less self-focused?*
- *How has being part of a Christian community (i.e. Church) helped you be more others-oriented?*
- *Who do you have collective identity with, and what are the values, principles, and priorities of that collective-self?*

A “worthy” life looks like **humility** and **trust**. This takes us to the great Christ/Messiah hymn in 2:6-11. Most scholars believe that Paul didn’t write this, but rather included/quoted this existing poem/hymn/creed that was likely well-known by the early Christians. You are likely familiar with my stance/emphasis, “*High Christology, Baby!*” And there is no higher Christology to be found in all of scripture than in this passage right here. It’s got incarnation; it’s got crucifixion; it’s got resurrection; it’s got ascension. It’s got humility; it’s got obedience; it’s got exaltation.

Only Colossians 1:15-20, and, well, the entire Gospel of John, can rival this passage in terms of high Christology. But, this passage (or this quote) is older. Which means that we see here an early, well-established Christology within the early Jesus movement.

Let's dive into it a bit...because it is so good. Notice how Paul sets it up, "*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...*" (2:5) So, "belief" in Jesus isn't simply about accepting some facts about Jesus or even trusting what He did on our behalf. There has ALWAYS been an expectation of imitation...of being/becoming like Jesus. This is what it means to be "Christian".

We could call this poem/hymn, "Greatness Redefined". The initial "fall" of humanity came through trying to grasp equality with God. Ever since, humans have grasped for power and have tried to achieve "greatness". History is full of such people...Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Napoleon, Hitler...to name a few. But then we have Jesus, who took the exact opposite approach. He was already "great", already part of the God-head, and relinquished power, position, and privilege. He became human...and not even a "great" human...born in the armpit of the Roman empire to a very common family. His life was marked by humble, sacrificial service, followed by a torturous, unjust death. But then He received "the highest place" (2:9). What everyone else tried to attain through power and violence, Jesus received through love. As a result, He is above all, and all will acknowledge and submit to Him.

One of the key differences between Jesus and all the rest is that Jesus sought the glory of God, while all other would-be rulers sought their own glory. The worldly approach is to "make something of yourself". Jesus, on the other hand, "...*made Himself nothing.*" (2:7) Literally it means He "emptied Himself", from the Greek "kenosis". This is what love looks like. This is what God is like.

If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus...and especially Jesus on the cross. That is what God is like; that's what it means to be God. Perhaps the reason we have a messed-up view of greatness is that we have a messed-up view of God. Paul is pointing his readers, then and now, in the right direction...look at Jesus.

This Christ hymn/poem is core, orthodox Christian theology. But remember, theology isn't simply about good/right doctrine but also good/right living. As always, Jesus shows us the way.

- *How does the world define greatness? How do you define greatness?*
- *What might it look like to practice kenosis/self-emptying in a tangible way?*
- *How have you relinquished power, privilege, position because you follow Jesus? (Is this what you understand it means to be a Christian? Explain.)*
- *How might there be joy in self-emptying? How is self-emptying required for justice?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Exploring Suffering...as a normal part of the Christian life

The New Testament writers seem to assume that persecution, suffering, hardship, adversity would be a part of the Christian life and should be expected. The early Church father, Tertullian, is noted for saying, *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”* Are we prepared to be misunderstood, maligned, mistreated for the sake of Christ?

The invitation this week is to become familiar with some (just a sampling really) of what the Bible says about the subject, as well as to explore what some are currently enduring for their faith. Remember, we follow the suffering One who invites us to join Him.

“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” (Acts 5:41)

“...we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.” (Romans 8:16-17)

“All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.” (II Thessalonians 1:5)

“So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God...” (II Timothy 1:8)

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (II Timothy 3:12)

“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.” (Hebrews 10:32)

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trail you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” (I Peter 4:12-16)

“I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus...” (Revelation 1:9)

Take some time to peruse the following websites...

<https://www.persecution.com/>

<https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/>