

Philippians #3 - Living the Good News

Bible Reading

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 1:27-2:4

In the previous session, we heard how Paul realised that his imprisonment in Rome, rather than being a source of shame, or evidence of God's disapproval, was an opportunity for him to share the gospel with people he would otherwise not have been able to reach.

Paul wants to assure the Christians at Philippi that even when things seem dark and out of control, God is still very much in control.

We also saw how Paul longed to be reunited with the Philippian congregation. His interest in them is not as converts, but as people, sisters and brothers in Christ. Christianity is not a solo journey, it is one we share with fellow believers, adopted into God's unique, strange and wonderful family.

Today's reading sees Paul moving from assurance to exhortation, encouraging the Philippian believers to live joyful Christian lives even in the face of strong opposition.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Philippians 1:27-30

Paul's opening sentence switches from his anticipation of being reunited with the Philippian congregation, to addressing their present situation of living out their faith without him being around... remember, even if Paul had been released immediately, it would still have taken him at least 3 weeks to get to Philippi.

The opening words indicate this subject change... Paul wants to make sure that the Philippians are not sitting around doing nothing while they wait for him to arrive and sort things out.

This is important. In the last session we saw how there is a very human tendency to put things off until 'just the right time'.

And we saw how that 'right time' rarely arrives. Conditions are never *just right!*

As a wise person once said,

'There are seven days in the week, someday isn't one of them.'

A good mantra for every Christian is...

'Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.'

Paul's first exhortation is significant. He wants the Philippian Christians to 'conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'.

Philippi was under Roman control, and the Roman authorities were not sympathetic to this new Christian 'cult'. Rome expected its citizens to be loyal to the Roman laws and gods.

Paul's approach to this is not to say 'disobey the Roman authorities, because you belong to another kingdom', neither is it 'do whatever the authorities tell you', especially if it means worshipping idols, or denying Jesus as their Lord.

Paul instead insists that Christians' priority is the gospel of Christ. Christians are amphibious. Like a frog lives in two worlds, under water and on land, Christians live in two places.

When you become a Christian, you move into an environment that Jesus called 'the Kingdom of God', a place where God is in charge. This kingdom is lived out (often in a very imperfect and partial way) in believer's lives, and in the life of the church community.

But we also live in the physical world, with its rules and regulations, with its pains, injustices and trouble. Christians believe that one day it will be transformed, and us with it, but until Jesus returns, we have dual-citizenship, which is both a tension and a comfort.

Jesus prayed for us in John 17:15, "Father don't take them out of the world, but keep them from evil."

The Apostle Paul talks about it when he explains the tension Christians experience between 'the current evil age' and 'the age to come'.

We live in a country which has been massively influenced by Christian beliefs. The concepts of freedom of choice, every human having equal value, education and healthcare are all the result of biblical teachings.

But freedom has come to mean 'being free from the necessity to do anything'. The pursuit of the 'good life' has become the pursuit of personal comfort, personal convenience and personal leisure.

The Christian worldview is radically different from this.

Living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ means knowing that freedom is freedom to live a life in relationship with our creator and sustainer, conforming to the way he has created us to live.

Being a follower of Jesus means putting God first. It involves others before our selves. Being good *to*, and good *for* others.

And this good life is not an easy life. Look at the way most people responded to Jesus.

The consequence of living the Jesus way is being a part of a secure family of people (striving together as one) who live without fear, even in situations where there is a lot to be frightened about.

Remember, when Paul uses the word 'you', he is nearly always using it about the church, not about the singular 'you'.

As he does elsewhere, Paul uses the language of competitive sports to emphasise that being a Christian is not a passive activity.

We need to 'stand firm', something that is all but impossible to do solo when you are being buffeted by all kinds of trials and temptations.

Which is why Paul urges them to do this in the power of the Holy Spirit, and as a Christian community, 'striving together as one'.

The word Paul uses for 'frightened' is closer to 'intimidated' or 'terrified'. Less like a spider in your kitchen sink, more like a seeing a tornado that is bearing down on your house. The Philippian Christians regularly faced real threats to their lives.

And as we move to the next verses we realise that the people who are opposing the Philippians are non-Christians, probably slave owners, neighbours and family members who are less than happy about their

slaves, neighbours and family members refusing to take part in their worship of the Roman emperor, and various religious festivals.

This is where 'conducting yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' comes into tension with 'being a good, law abiding citizen'. The Philippian Christians knew that their Lord was now Jesus, and that worshipping any other god was idolatry.

And as 21st century Northoltians, our Lord is also Jesus. And he requires us to live lives that are worthy of the gospel of Christ even when it makes our employers, neighbours and even our families uncomfortable.

Whether it is our insistence that we go to church on Sunday, a refusal to join in with malicious gossip, or avoiding situations where we know that we will be tempted to do things that Jesus would not want us to do, living as a Christian will not always be popular with non-believers, and sometimes even with other Christians.

Paul wants the Philippians to know that trials and temptations are all part of being a Christian. Although they are 800 miles away from Paul, they share in same struggles that Paul had while with them, and is going through now, imprisoned in Rome.

When our Christian brothers and sisters struggle, we feel that struggle. That is what it means to be a part of the 'body of Christ'. When Janet's body is attacked by cancer, we experience her pain. Not in the same way that Janet does, but we do feel it. Just hearing you praying for her lets me know that.

Christians down the ages have regularly amazed their neighbours with the way they live such good, loving and generous lives. And this regularly infuriates their neighbours.

A good historic example of this is the 4th century Roman emperor Julian.

Julian was born into a Roman Empire that had recently converted to Christianity. Julian hated Christianity (he was known as Julian the Apostate) and was eager to return the Empire to its pagan roots.

Let me read an excerpt from a letter he sent to a pagan priest...

'We ought then to share our money with all people, but more generously with the good, and with the helpless and poor to suffice for their need... For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see our people lack aid from us.'

I like the way he refers to Christians as 'impious Galileans', followers of Jesus were often thought of as 'atheists' because they refused to worship the Roman gods.

We are fortunate to live in a country where being a Christian doesn't carry many penalties. People may be dismissive, even hostile to your faith in Jesus, but you are unlikely to be beaten up or imprisoned for it.

The Philippian Christians would have faced immense pressure to 'fit in' with their community's way of doing things.

Their refusal to worship Roman emperor, or to take part in pagan religious festivals meant they would have been seen as 'trouble makers'. If you didn't do your part in appeasing the gods, you might upset them, which could bring down their judgement on the whole community.

Notice that Paul doesn't say, 'don't worry, God will make sure that everything is all right'. In fact, he says that this is all part of what it means to be a Christian.

Suffering is one of the least sought-after of the spiritual gifts (along with martyrdom), but there are times when being faithful to Jesus will mean that we may have to struggle with stuff that is difficult and painful.

At this point I'm going to take a short break from studying Philippians to give us a contemporary example of what conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ can involve.

Modern China, like the Roman Empire, has an uneasy relationship with Christianity. There is an officially recognised state church, but it is heavily monitored and controlled by the Chinese government.

In the last 40 years the Christian population in China has risen from 1 million to 100 million (nearly twice the population of England), and most of this growth has occurred in independent 'house' churches.

These congregations are frowned upon by the Chinese government, and their pastors and members of their congregations are regularly harassed and arrested.

In 2018, Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church was arrested, and charged with 'inciting subversion of state power'. In 2019 he was given a 9 year prison sentence, which he is now serving.

He has only been allowed one family visit since he was detained, by his wife in November 2021. She reported he had lost a lot of weight, and that although prison conditions are poor, he has been allowed to read books.

Wang knew that the chances that he would be imprisoned were high. Before he became a Christian he was a human-rights lawyer, and since becoming a Christian he had regularly been critical of the Chinese government.

With this in mind, he wrote a letter entitled 'My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience', and gave instructions for it to be published by his church if he was detained for more than 48 hours.

I'm going to read some excerpts from it, but I urge you to read the full text, available at www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/persecuted-chinese-pastor-issues-declaration-faithful-disobedience/

On the basis of the teachings of the Bible and the mission of the gospel, I respect the authorities God has established in China. For God deposes kings and raises up kings. This is why I submit to the historical and institutional arrangements of God in China.

I accept and respect the fact that this Communist regime has been allowed by God to rule temporarily. For this reason, I am joyfully willing to submit myself to their enforcement of the law as though submitting to the discipline and training of the Lord.

At the same time, I believe that this Communist regime's persecution against the church is a greatly wicked, unlawful action. As a pastor of a Christian church, I must denounce this wickedness openly and severely. The calling that I have received requires me to use non-violent methods to disobey those human laws that disobey the Bible and God. My Saviour Christ also requires me to joyfully bear all costs for disobeying wicked laws.

I also understand that this happens to be the very reason why the Communist regime is filled with fear at a church that is no longer afraid of it.

I hope God uses me, by means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom that they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

Moreover, I must point out that persecution against the Lord's church and against all Chinese people who believe in Jesus Christ is the most wicked and the most horrendous evil of Chinese society. This is not only a sin against Christians. It is also a sin against all non-Christians. For the government is brutally and ruthlessly threatening them and hindering them from coming to Jesus. There is no greater wickedness in the world than this.

If this regime is one day overthrown by God, it will be for no other reason than God's righteous punishment and revenge for this evil. For on earth, there has only ever been a thousand-year church. There has never been a thousand-year government. There is only eternal faith. There is no eternal power.

Those who lock me up will one day be locked up by angels. Those who interrogate me will finally be questioned and judged by Christ. When I think of this, the Lord fills me with a natural compassion and grief toward those who are attempting to and actively imprisoning me. Pray that the Lord would use me, that he would grant me patience and wisdom, that I might take the gospel to them.

Separate me from my wife and children, ruin my reputation, destroy my life and my family—the authorities are capable of doing all of these things. However, no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith; no one can make me change my life; and no one [but God] can raise me from the dead.

Jesus is the Christ, son of the eternal, living God. He died for sinners and rose to life for us. He is my king and the king of the whole earth yesterday, today, and forever. I am his servant, and I am imprisoned because of this. I will resist in meekness those who resist God, and I will joyfully violate all laws that violate God's laws.

And this is what Paul is talking about when he says that 'this is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but you will be saved'. Just as Pastor Wang writes...

I also understand that this happens to be the very reason why the Communist regime is filled with fear at a church that is no longer afraid of it.

When we conduct our lives 'in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ', without being intimidated or frightened, people will notice. They may not like it, but they will be challenged by it.

In Britain, this probably won't mean being imprisoned for our faith. But it may mean friends being offended by our 'non woke' views on sexuality, money and free speech.

Paul now shifts his focus from the outside pressures the Philippians face to how they are to deal with people within their church community. And the key theme is loving unity.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:1-4

And what we see is what could be a short commentary on the words of Jesus to his disciples shortly before he was crucified. Words that Paul would probably been familiar with...

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 13:34-35

Paul gives four reasons, all starting with 'if any', followed by a divinely provided benefit. And they are not about 'me, me, me', but about our life in Jesus, about being outward looking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The first is the encouragement we have from being united in Christ. The church is group of people who have been adopted into God's family. We didn't choose God, or one another, God chose us.

And our unity relies not on sharing the same likes and dislikes as one another, but on each one of us being 'united with Christ'.

And this unity can only happen when we rely on Christ's love, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which will result in us being tender and compassionate to one another.

And this shared love for and dependence on a God who loved us enough to die in our place, allows a group of very different people to be 'like-minded', because we share 'the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind'.

And how do we foster this kind of loving unity?

Simple.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others

Philippians 2:3-4

Basically, be like Jesus. Loving unity is achieved by actively valuing others above ourselves. And in the next session we're going dig a little deeper into what that means.