

## Philippians 1:15-30

...striving together for the faith of the gospel – v. 27

Life in many of its aspects may be described as a process of striving. As workers we strive to get ahead. As students we strive to make good grades. As athletes we strive to win contests. Even a baby strives to get his mother's attention when there's something he needs or wants.

What's true of life in general is no less true for a Christian. He should be known for certain things that he strives for and strives against. Paul draws an interesting comparison and contrast between the world's striving and the Christian's striving. So he writes in 1Cor. 9:25 *And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things*. That's his general statement. He's drawing from the arena of sports when he makes this statement. Another version translates the verse this way: *And every one who competes in the games exercises self control*.

The statement pertains to every area of life in which men strive for something. And it makes it plain, doesn't it – the general principle that in life if a man wants to get ahead he needs to strive for the discipline of self control. An athlete needs to know how to get in shape and stay in shape. There are things that he must do and there are things he must avoid in order to gain the mastery – to use Paul's term.

Then in that same verse (1Cor. 9:25), Paul not only draws a comparison but he then goes on to show the contrast between the world's striving and the Christian's striving. *Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible*. We, as Christians, have a higher aim behind our striving. We strive for something that will last forever. We strive not for recognition from men – but for recognition from Christ Himself.

There will be nothing gained in this world that can come close to comparing to that time when men will stand before the judgement seat of Christ to be recognized by Christ, commended by Christ or condemned by Christ. That time is coming. And it will be a fearful time. There will be those who will hear the Lord say on that occasion – *Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world* (Mt. 25:34). But there will be others who will hear the Lord say *depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels* (Mt. 25:41).

The irony of that day will be found in the fact that there will be many who thought they were striving for heaven – and yet they find themselves bound for hell. Christ refers to these in Mt. 7:22 where He says *Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*.

That's rather ironic, isn't it – that hell will be filled with religious people – people who thought they were striving for heaven and yet come woefully short of it. What's the difference between them and the ones that hear the Lord saying *well done thou good and*

*faithful servant?* Is the difference only a matter of degree? Will there actually be those who do enough to enter and those who don't?

Those who know the gospel – know, of course, that heaven is not gained by our works. It comes by grace through faith. It comes as a free gift *not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost* (Titus 3:5).

If that is indeed the case, then, that salvation is by grace through faith – then what does Paul mean when he says *we strive for an incorruptible crown*? Or to use the words of the text this morning – what does Paul mean in Phil. 1:27 when he refers to *striving together for the faith of the gospel*.

The text places before us a very important concept – important in the sense that your destiny in heaven or hell depends in part on a right understanding of what a Christian strives for and how he strives for it. And not only is a man's eternal destiny at stake through a right understanding of the concept – but a Christian's well being in this world is also at stake.

I believe that it's very common to find those among Christians who place their hope for heaven in Christ – as well they should. They know that salvation is by grace through faith and that not of themselves. And yet because of wrong notions about what they're to strive for and how they're to strive for it – they find themselves either puffed up with a sense of self-righteousness – or they find themselves suffering with chronic despair.

You begin to see, I hope, how important it is for the Christian to know what to strive for – and how to strive for it. In Luther's hymn the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza begins – *Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing*. This is the thing I would have you avoid today – for your striving to be losing. And so I'd like to analyze this statement by Paul that we find in Phil. 1:27 – with the aim that we learn to strive for the right thing in the right way I want you to think with me on the words of the text:

### *Striving Together for the Faith of the Gospel*

The first thing I want you to see from this statement is:

#### I. The Implication Behind the Statement -

What is Paul talking about when he exhorts the Philippians to *stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*?

The implication behind the statement is that great effort must be put forth with regard to the faith of the gospel. Our English word *strive* is defined this way: *to exert much effort or energy; to struggle or contend*.

When we strive together for the faith of the gospel, then, we are to apply fervent zeal to a number of things:

We're to strive for the advancement of the gospel. I believe this is what Paul has particularly in view in the statement. Paul, you see, was writing this epistle from prison. It would have been very tempting for the Philippians to think that the gospel was being defeated. This newly found religion that focused on Jesus Christ was being persecuted and would soon be stamped out – so it might seem.

The Jews hated this religion – it made them look bad. The Roman rulers would not be sympathetic to this religion. It was a source of division and besides that it exalted Christ above Caesar. Paul himself had been hostile toward this religion before he had been converted. And in a sense Paul's hostility was and is the same hostility that can be found in the hearts of sinners to this very day.

In a world, therefore, that is hostile to Christ and hostile to the gospel of Christ – Christians must strive for the faith of the gospel – i.e. they must contend for the truth of it and they must be true to it even in a world that hates it. And they must believe that it can and will prevail. This was the challenge facing the Philippians.

As I said a moment ago – Paul was in prison and the temptation would have been very strong to think that Christianity would be extinguished. Would you notice, however, how Paul strove for the faith of the gospel by looking at v. 12 *But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places.* Do you see how Paul interpreted his own circumstances? He didn't view his imprisonment as something that would defeat the gospel – he viewed it rather as something that was advancing the gospel.

Striving for the faith of the gospel, then, requires us to view the kingdom of heaven as advancing – no matter what circumstances may seem to say to us. We strive for the faith of the gospel by striving to see the things that are true – even though they are unseen. We don't see Christ today – at least not with the eye of the flesh – but we know that He rules and reigns. We know that He's risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of God. We know that all power and authority has been committed to Him.

And we know, therefore, that His cause is advancing and will prevail. That's not always easy for Christians to be convinced of. What do we see in our day? We see everything that is contrary to Christ prevailing. We see sin advancing. We see sin being legalized and righteousness being outlawed.

If we were walking by sight rather than faith it would be very easy to conclude that the cause of Christ is diminishing. We might be further tempted to think this way by dwelling on the sorry condition of the church – never mind the world. Don't we see that so much of what takes place in the name of Christ today is spurious. So much of it is phony. So much of it is done the wrong way and for the wrong reasons.

Could I add to this point that we strive for the faith of the gospel by applying ourselves to godliness on account of the gospel. I made reference in my introduction to 1Cor. 9:25 – **{1Cor. 9:24-27}**. Some commentators believe that Paul is making reference to the ancient

Olympic games when he speaks of running and fighting. He is calling for spiritual fitness along the same lines that an athlete strives for physical fitness. I'm afraid there are many Christians that are spiritually unfit because they fail to do any exercising that pertains to spiritual fitness.

I was interested some while back in Thomas Boston's sermon on 1Tim. 4:7 on the theme of exercising ourselves unto godliness. He pointed out that the statement in v. 8 *bodily exercise profiteth little* – has no reference to physical exercise. Paul is not contrasting physical exercise to spiritual exercise – what he's doing rather, is contrasting external religion to heart religion. Bodily exercise in other words refers to merely going through the external motions of religion. You come to church bodily – but your mind and heart is still at home in bed in other words. There is little profit in that.

Striving for the faith of the gospel, then, means applying ourselves with our hearts and minds and souls to reading, to exhortation, and to the study of doctrine. Christianity, rightly practiced, is a thinking or a contemplative religion. It calls for reading. It calls for meditation and of course it calls for action in our lives based upon our reading and meditations.

These are a couple of the implications, then, behind striving for the faith of the gospel. Would you consider next:

## II. The Objects of Our Striving –

I want to consider this heading both positively and negatively. You see there are things that the Christian strives for and there are things that the Christian strives against.

In Lk. 13:24 Christ says: *Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.* Strive to enter heaven – that's what Christ is saying. And it is precisely on this point that our striving must be the right kind of striving. I said in my introduction that there will be those on the judgment day that thought they were striving for heaven – and indeed they were striving for heaven – but because their striving was the wrong kind of striving they fail to enter heaven and they end up being lost and condemned.

The kind of striving that Christ calls for is a striving to understand the gospel. Many think that they understand the gospel and they don't. They don't understand the grounds for their acceptance with God. They don't understand the work of the Spirit in regeneration. They don't understand the meaning of justification by faith.

And so they fail to lean on Christ the right way – and they fail to discern the evidence of the Spirit's work. They fail to look for the right evidence of grace in their lives. They may presume to have faith in Christ but their lives have really never been effected by Christ. Or they may strive to do good works – but they don't know the connection between their works and the finished work of Christ. They end up looking to themselves in a way that they shouldn't.

There are many that seek to enter in – Christ says but they’re not able. They’re on a broad road leading to destruction. It’s because the road is narrow that leads to life that there are few that find it. It’s not because that road is difficult that they fail – it’s because the road is narrow that they don’t find it.

If you would strive for the faith of the gospel, therefore, you must strive to understand the gospel as fully and as clearly as you possibly can. You must be able to discern and apply yourself the truth that all your righteousnesses are as filthy rags – and so Christ offers you His righteousness so that you may be accepted of God based on His righteousness and not your own.

You must discern and apply to your life the truth that the Spirit of God works in the hearts of Christians to regenerate them. Where the Spirit of Christ is at work there will be certain things that characterize the Christian. He’ll have a desire to pray and worship. He’ll have a desire for holiness. He won’t attain it perfectly – but he’ll certainly be striving to move in that direction. He’ll lament his failures but he’ll continue to strive. Can you discern in your heart the evidence of the Spirit’s work?

This is what is involved in striving to enter heaven through the narrow gate – we strive to learn all that is involved in Christ’s atoning death. We strive to know all the ramifications of His shed blood. We strive to discern the work of the Spirit in our lives convicting us of sin and convincing us of Christ.

We strive in our praying – Rom. 15:30 *Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in [your] prayers to God for me.*

There is yet one other area in which the Christian strives – and the text I’m referring to now makes it evident that we don’t strive near enough against this. I said a moment ago that there are things we strive for and things we strive against. In Heb 12:4 we read: *Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.*

We must sadly confess that we take sin much too lightly. How weak is our resolve to fight against it. How weak is our effort to fortify ourselves against it to keep it from overcoming us. We fail to treat sin as a thing of very serious consequence.

If only you would consider that sin is what condemns your soul to hell. If only you would consider that it is your sin that nailed the iron pins into Christ’s hands and feet to save you from that hell. How hard should we strive against sin? Christ Himself said – *if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell* (Mt. 5:29,30).

I don't believe Christ meant for us to take these words literally – but I do believe that the teaching behind His words is that we should strive much more fervently to overcome the sins that so easily beset us.

And so we see the implication of the statement *striving for the faith of the gospel*. We see a few of the objects of our striving – we strive for heaven by grace through faith, by striving to understand the gospel – we strive for the obedience of faith – we strive for the advancement of the kingdom of grace – we strive for holiness and we strive against sin. Could I conclude with a word about:

### III. The Manner of Our Striving –

In 2Tim. 2:5 we read: *And if a man also strive for masteries, [yet] is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully.*

There's a lawful way to strive and an unlawful way to strive – and the Christian's understanding of his striving will determine whether he lives victoriously – or whether he lives in defeat – or whether he lives hypocritically.

You'll live victoriously if you understand your striving in the light of the gospel – remember the text – *striving together for the faith of the gospel*. Striving in the light of the gospel provides the right motivation for striving. We strive for righteousness, in other words – because Christ has given us His righteousness. We don't strive to earn heaven – we could never earn heaven – but we strive for righteousness because Christ gives us heaven and gives us eternal life fully and freely by His grace.

We strive against sin – not because we'll ultimately overcome it while we live in this sin cursed world – but we strive against sin because Christ has died for our sins. Because He bore that condemnation for me – I'll strive against the things that brought God's wrath down upon Him in my place.

Our motivation, then, is the motivation of gratitude – not the motivation of incentive to gain. There's nothing for us to gain. Righteousness has been freely given – heaven is your home – eternal life is your portion as a believer in Christ. You enjoy a standing with God that cannot be improved upon. And it's as you realize the many blessings that are yours in Christ that you can incentive to strive for the things we strive for and strive against.

If you fail to keep in mind what you have in Christ then your striving runs the risk of becoming the striving to gain something you could never gain. How many Christians are exhorted to strive for righteousness – but they're not taught the connection between their striving and the gospel. They live in defeat because they well know that their striving isn't enough. There's always room for improvement. Who among us could say we've arrived in the things we strive for? Those Christians who realize rightly that they've not arrived will become defeated if they fall prey to the temptation of thinking that their striving is a striving to earn.

And then there are Christians whose striving might be labeled a hypocritical striving. Their foolish enough to think they have arrived. They strive for righteousness and they

think they've met God's standards. (ex. of a Pastor's conference – one preacher who gloried that they were not as other men).

The only way they can reach such a point is to lower those standards and elevate their own self-righteousness. They've deceived themselves and they appear before the world as arrogant self-righteous hypocrites – and so they are.

And so the manner of our striving is as important as the effort itself. And if we are striving for the right things in the right way – then we'll be seen as humble – not self-righteous – and we'll be seen as thankful – not as those who are trying to earn something they could never earn and don't need to earn. Why would you strive to earn something that's freely given?

Could I conclude by noting from our text that our striving is something that is not accomplished independently. Note that Paul says that *with one mind we strive together for the faith of the gospel*. This is why we need each other. This is why we must assemble together to provoke one another to good works.

Carnal pride is constantly tempted toward self-righteousness. And the high standards of God's law can discourage us in the light of our sinful natures. So we strive together in order to maintain the right focus and the right perspective in our striving.

I wonder this morning – Are you striving for the faith of the gospel? Have you entered into life at the strait gate? Is there evidence of the Spirit's work in your heart. You'll know He's been working in your heart if you view sin rightly and you view Christ rightly. Have you seen yourself as a hell bound and hell deserving sinner? There will be no one in heaven who didn't first see himself as a worthy candidate for hell.

Do you believe in Christ this morning – that He came and He died and He rose again from the dead after bearing your condemnation in your place? If you can see Him and do believe in Him then you will indeed strive for the faith of the gospel. May your confession and experience be the same as Paul's who wrote in Col 1:29 *Whereunto I also labor, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily*.