

Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Introduction (blank slide)

For those of you who are visiting with us today, we welcome you and are glad that you have chosen to spend your Sunday morning with us. During this Spring semester at Virginia Tech we are preaching through the letter of the apostle Paul to the church at Philippi, of the letter to the Philippians. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, waiting to be brought to trial before the Emperor Nero. yet in spite of this, and of the chains which held him in a prison cell, Paul wrote a letter that is full of joy, so our series title is “Joy for the Journey”

Slide

Last week Sandy Young, one of our fulltime elders, spoke on Philippians 1 verses 18-26. This passage and the questions Sandy asked relate primarily to the *internal* life of the Christian believer. Sandy spoke in particular on verse 21 “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” He asked and then answered the questions “What does this mean?” “Why should we live that way?” and “How do we get there?”

After making his resounding statement of assurance “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul goes on to wrestle with these two options: “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” He then moves beyond this theme of his personal life and the internal life of the believer and continues in today’s passage with how this works out. In this passage Paul is speaking about the *external* life of the Christian believer, as he asks and answers the question “How then should we live?”

Slide

Phil 1:27-30

Let us read this passage together

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 one spirit, contending as one man 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 on 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.

Blank slide

Prayer

In the passage we have just read together, Paul gives us the clearest possible challenge to live out our faith as Christian believers. Verse 27 reads in part “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

Slide

Literally “Exercise your citizenship worthily of the gospel of Christ” Philippi was a Roman colony, a prized position in the Roman empire, and its citizens were automatically Roman citizens, and enjoyed all the benefits of this citizenship. They were a homeland in miniature. So Paul is pointing out that this is also true of the Christians. We are brought together in the church; in our case this is BCF. Our citizenship is in heaven, but here on this earth we are a homeland in miniature, and we enjoy the privileges of our heavenly citizenship within this miniature expression of heaven. And so as citizens of heaven we are called to live up to our privileged position, just as for example a US Ambassador must live up to his or her calling to live as a good representative of the USA in a foreign country.

But let us note first of all that Paul begins his command with the words “Whatever happens”, referring back to his uncertainty about whether or not he would survive his judgment at the hands of Nero. He is saying in effect “Whether I live or die, you must go on”. Our faith, in other words, does not rest upon some Christian leader, no

matter how godly and how wise, but on Jesus Christ. He alone is our hope and our salvation. The teaching and preaching of the English pastor John Stott was a great blessing to me, but he went to be with His Lord in 2011. My wife became a believer through the preaching of Bill Graham, but he will probably go to be with the Lord within the next few years. If our faith was in these men, we would be in bad shape spiritually, but “whatever happens” reminds us that our faith is in our Lord, not in men and women. This does not mean that we do not miss those who have gone before us; the death of our brother Chuck Schumann last year left a big hole in the leadership of the Blacksburg Chinese Christian Church, but God’s work goes on without him.

Slide

Let us now try to unpack this command and see how it applies to us as Christian believers. As we do so, we can ask three questions: “Why should we do this?” “How can we do this?” and “What will happen when we do this?”

1. Why should we do this?

There are several answers we could give to this question; it is after all a command from God’s word which we must not disregard, but I will suggest two important additional reasons:

Slide

a. So that we do not bring dishonor on God’s name.

Sadly, not all who claim to be Christians act in ways that bring honor to God. In the papers or on the web this week we read the sad story of Samuel Mullet Sr., the leader of a dissident Amish sect who was sentenced to 15 years in prison for a series of bizarre beard- and hair-cutting attacks on other Ohio Amish that drew national attention.

Slide

And only a few years ago the President of the National Association of Evangelicals was forced to resign from his position as the senior pastor of a large church in Colorado over revelations that he had paid for sex and drugs with a male prostitute.

In 2007, Senator Chuck Grassley opened a probe into the finances of six televangelists who preach a "prosperity gospel". The probe investigated reports of lavish lifestyles by televangelists fleets of Rolls Royces, palatial mansions, private jets and other expensive items purportedly paid for by television viewers who donate due to the ministries' encouragement of offerings.

And probably all of us have heard of the hatred coming from the so-called Westboro Baptist Church and its leader Fred Phelps; a church that has picketed funerals of soldiers and is known for its vitriolic anti-gay and anti-Jewish rhetoric.

Slide

And sadly this is the only image of Christians that so many see. They see hypocrisy in some church leaders, they see bigotry and hatred in others, and they are turned off. And let me say that if you are here today and you are not a Christian believer and if you are saying “I do not like these so-called Christians” then I can say “I agree with you”. I too hate it when people dishonor the Lord Jesus when they claim to be Christians and use their position to accrue wealth or to indulge in sexual relationships outside of marriage or to spew words of hate on others.

But we do not have to commit major public sins to dishonor God’s name. We can dishonor Him by a bad attitude at work; men, we can dishonor him by not loving and supporting our wives; students, we can dishonor him by cheating on tests; we can dishonor him by harmful and spiteful gossip, and in so many other ways. In fact, we dishonor God whenever we do **not** conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

But we who are called by Christ’s name have no reason to boast about our lives as if we had somehow earned whatever righteousness we have. The English reformer John Bradford had the right idea. He was imprisoned by Queen Mary in 1553 in the Tower of London for his Protestant faith

Slide

Looking out of his prison cell window one day he saw some criminals being led off to execution, and exclaimed “there but for the grace of God goes John Bradford”. This phrase has entered our language as “there but for the grace of God go I”. So please also hear me when I say that that I am far from perfect (if you doubt this just ask my wife Beverly), and I can say with John Bradford “there but for the grace of God go I”. So I need to hear this word from God, just as we all do.

So ultimately a part of our motivation for living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ is the negative one of not bringing dishonor on God’s name. But I suppose you could achieve this by living as some sort of hermit, and never meeting people. But while that might keep you from dishonoring God in any major way, it would not do anything positive. So the second and more important reason to live a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ is:

Slide

b. To draw people to Christ

Our Lord Jesus gave us the secret to honoring God when He told his disciples shortly before His death:

Slide

John 13:34-35

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

Jesus said “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” And when we love one another, and also when we love those who are not yet believers, and when this love becomes visible to those around us, it becomes irresistible. The world is hungry for his sort of love; the cheap pleasures of academic achievement and of worldly honor and of drink and drugs and sex are ultimately unsatisfying, and when the world sees genuine Christian love it wants to experience it too.

Slide

In Sandy’s Friday BCF Bylines he had a link to a fascinating testimony in Christianity Today titled “My Train Wreck Conversion” by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield. She was a tenured professor of English at a major American university, a radical feminist, and a lesbian. She lived a happy meaningful life with her partner. As part of her academic studies she began to study the religious right, and wrote a negative article about Promise Keepers in her local newspaper. The article generated a huge response, so that she kept a large box on each side of her desk: one for hate mail, one for fan mail. The hate mail was from people identified as Christians. But one letter defied classification. It was from Ken Smith, the pastor of the local Reformed Presbyterian Church. He gently encouraged her to explore the questions she had raised, and offered to meet with her for dinner. Rosaria accepted his invitation, became friends with him and his wife, and over a 2-year period was drawn to Christ through their love, her reading of the Bible, and her new understanding of who Jesus was and of His death for her on the cross. The love Ken and his wife showed to Rosaria was a key factor in her coming to know the Lord.

Slide

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his poem “Each for All” has this stanza:

“Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbors creed hath lent”

We are all of us affecting other people by our lives; are we moving people closer to God, or are we giving people more reasons not to believe in God because of the inconsistency of our lives with our faith?

So the key question is

Slide

2. How should we do this?

How do we find the ability to live in a way that honors God, that loves our neighbor and our fellow believers, and that draws people to Christ? Paul gives us the clue in the second part of verse 27:

I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

The key words here are “stand firm in one spirit” This means that we are called to live in unity. We are able to live worthily of the gospel of Christ because we do it in the context and fellowship of God’s church. We are not “lone rangers” but members of a body of believers who are called to love each other and care for each other and to support each other. But to do this together we must live in unity with our fellow believers. A church divided is a terrible witness to the grace of God, but it is also a terrible loss to each and every member, as they lose out on the encouragement and fellowship that comes (or should come) from being part of a local piece of the body of Christ. So Paul stresses the need for unity in our individual and corporate lives. This unity has three components:

Slide

i. Standing firm in unity of the Spirit. “I will know that you stand firm in one spirit” The text here does not tell us whether Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit or to our own spirit. Alec Motyer, in his commentary on this passage, believes that it refers to the Holy Spirit, primarily because of the parallel with Phil 4:1 “Therefore, my brothers, . . .that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” and I agree with this interpretation. So Paul is saying that we already have this unity; it is a unity brought about by the Holy Spirit when He gave us new life in Christ and incorporated us into the church

Slide

Titus 3:5-6 He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,
1 Cor 12:13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body

So because we have been brought into the church through the Holy Spirit, we are able to stand firm with our Christian brothers and sisters, knowing that they too are part of Christ’s body. When trials come into our lives, we are able to receive help from our fellow believers, knowing that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, because they too have been saved through the work of the Holy Spirit and baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. If our faith wavers, we can be encouraged and strengthened by our fellow believers. But it is hard for these things to happen in a large group on Sunday morning, and this is why the elders encourage everyone to get involved in a small group of some kind; House Group, campus Bible Study group, MOPS, etc., so that you can be helped to “stand firm in one spirit”

Slide

ii. Striving together in unity of heart and mind

Phil 1:27

I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, *contending as one man for the faith of the gospel* (NIV)

I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, *with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel* (NKJV)

The NIV translation here is I think misleading when it translates the Greek as “contending as one man”. The NKJV is closer to the mark “with one mind striving together”. The point Paul is making is that not only are we united in one body through the Holy Spirit, but we must also live in unity of heart and mind. In other words, our unity must be a unity of emotion, decision, and ambition. This sort of unity cannot be faked; it comes naturally as we learn to work together and serve together. So Paul is saying something like “as you work hard together for the faith of the gospel – as you work to hold to the truth of the gospel and to bring the gospel to those who have not heard it – you must do so with a unity of heart and mind.” This does not mean that we must all work hard together on the same things. God has given each of us gifts from the Holy Spirit, and just as we have different gifts, so we have different ways of using these gifts in ministry. And it is wonderful to see how God brings people together who have a unity of heart and mind to use their gifts for the faith of the gospel. Two years ago God gave some men a vision of reaching men, and Men’s Fraternity came about. Many years ago God gave some men and some women a vision of reaching young boys and girls, and Christian Service Brigade and Pioneer Girls ministries were born. More recently God gave some couples a vision of helping families

adopt children, and the Loved by Choice ministry was started. And these ministries and others continue because there is a unity of heart and mind among those who serve in them.

Slide

iii. A unity of action.

Did you catch the words “Striving together”? The word Paul uses for "strive" is *sunathleo*. You can hear the word *athleo* in there, from which we get our word athlete. It's the word used in 2 Timothy 2:5 where Paul says, "An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." We conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ as we each individually serve in some way, in the same way that an athlete trains for an athletic event.

Just as God has given us different gifts, so also He has called us (or will call us) to different ministries. God's plan for the church is that each member *serves* in some way. Maybe some of you see your membership in BCF as similar to being a passenger on a cruise ship; all your needs are attended to by member of the crew.

Slide

But that is not God's plan for the church. We are all called to be members of the crew, more like rowers in a galley!

Slide

Slide

3. What will happen when we do this?"

a. We will be bold for the gospel.

Phil 1:27-28

I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

As we work together, as we stand up for the faith of the gospel in the face of opposition from the world around us, united in our faith, God will give us the courage to stand firmly without being frightened. So the Christian believer who is part of a faithful, ministering church will have the spiritual support and encouragement to witness boldly in spite of opposition.

But we also need to recognize that Christians who are not in a good Bible-believing church lack this support and are at risk for losing their faith. This is particularly the case for High Schoolers going off to college; sadly many of them meet aggressive anti-Christian professors in subjects such as biology and English, and are challenged by what they hear. Some lose their faith because of this. That is why the 217 ministry at BCF is such a blessing, teaching our HS kids how to defend their faith with a clear understanding of where the assaults will come from.

Slide

b. The world will see its true state.

Phil 1:27-28

contending as one man 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...

As Christian believers stand boldly for the gospel, from a position of unity and mutual service, those around us will have clear evidence that the gospel is true. If they are thinking people, they will then realize that if the gospel is true, then Jesus Christ was raised from the grave. And if Jesus was raised from the grave, then there is life after death. So often the unconverted man or woman believes that somehow or other all will be well after death; what they cannot face is the judgment of God. It was Satan's first ploy to deny a God of judgment:

Gen 3:4-5

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." But when the non Christian sees (or begins to see) the truth of God's judgment, they will either suppress this truth or they will let it lead them to Him who is the truth. Rosaria Butterfield, the woman whose conversion I mentioned earlier, asked a friend who was warning her of the danger of reading her Bible "J, what if it is true? What if Jesus is a real and risen Lord? What

if we are all in trouble?" By the grace of God she responded to the truth and found Christ (or was found by Him), but sadly many do not respond to the clear evidence of God's grace and His judgment.

Slide

c. We will see our true state.

Slide

Phil 1:27-30

...contending as one man 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 on 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.

As Christians work together in unity, boldly sharing our faith through our words and their actions, and enduring the persecution that sometimes comes with bold witness, our faith is strengthened. It is significant that the church grew the most in China when it was illegal and persecuted by the government. We do not have that open persecution in the USA, but there are increasing signs that Christians no longer enjoy the favor that we once had. While open persecution is unlikely, we may face increasing pressures to compromise our faith, and those who refuse to compromise may face job loss or even fines and imprisonment. But even absent open persecution, Paul encourages us by reminding us that our unity and our service are signs that God is still on the throne, and that we will be saved by Him through His son Jesus.

Slide

4. How are you striving for the faith of the gospel?

Let me come back to the phrase “striving together for the faith of the gospel” and ask the question “how are you striving?”

Because God has made you unique, and has gifted you with His own choice of spiritual gifts, your striving for the faith of the gospel will not be exactly like anyone else's. Don't be paralyzed in your imagination by comparing yourself with others, but realize that God wills for you to do something with effort and discipline and endurance to promote the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

It may be that you will write letters, or practice hospitality in your neighborhood, or share books that you are reading, or visit nursing homes or prisons or hospitals.

Or perhaps you will strive for the faith of the gospel by weaving your way into the PTA or neighborhood action groups. Maybe you will invite a young mother to come with you to MOPS. Or maybe you will bring some neighborhood kids to Pioneer Girls or Christian Service Brigade on Wednesday evening. Or maybe you will start a lunchtime Bible study in your workplace. Or maybe you will feel the call of summer missions, and get involved in one of the BCF teams ministering around the world this summer.

If you are a student you may get involved with one of the campus groups in leading a dorm Bible study, or in greeting freshmen when they arrive in the Fall.

The possibilities are endless; be creative in seeking out ways to strive together for the faith of the gospel

Amen