

Put the Gospel First

- Philippians 1:12-18
- Here we have the apostle in a Roman prison, the greatest evangelist the world had ever known is out of circulation, it seems, and you would think that would put the church in a tailspin. You would think that would set the Gospel back a few years, maybe even halt it in its tracks. But instead, the Gospel is advancing, not retreating. Paul wants them to know, as he says in verse, 12, that what has happened to him has served to advance the Gospel! Tony Merida wrote that this is one of the most relevant passages in the New Testament on how to maintain joy in the ministry. Paul is not feeling sorry for himself or wondering why this was happening to him, or feeling bitter towards God for all the trials he has gone through, just to GET to this Roman prison. No, just the opposite! He rejoices that the Gospel is advancing, because Paul's life purpose was this: put the Gospel first. And he makes a great argument in this passage as to why it should be our first priority as well. Let's look at this passage under these three headings: the apostle's joy, the disciples' confidence, and the rival's ambition. Then we will close with Paul's exhortation to put the Gospel first!
- **The Apostle's Joy**
- Though Paul doesn't mention his joy, his rejoicing, until the end of this passage, you can hear it in his voice, can't you? "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel." I can see him writing this and glancing at the Roman soldiers chained to him, and with a wink and a grin he acknowledges that THEY have heard the Gospel, that morning! Paul's concern is for the church in Philippi at this moment, that they would know that he is not discouraged, he is not disappointed, he is not deceived in any way: his heart is filled with joy! How can that be? Two reasons stand out.
- First, Paul is focused on the purposes of God, not the problems of Paul. His confidence is in the LORD God Almighty, the Sovereign King. Maybe he is thinking back to that night when he had a vision to come to Macedonia: "Come and help us," the man in the vision said. Paul had wanted to go into Asia Minor, but it was God's purpose that Paul and the missionary team go to Europe, to Philippi, to witness to Lydia, and to deliver a slave girl from demons. It was God's purpose for Paul and Silas to end up beaten and bloodied in a Philippian jail because God had a man there, too, who needed to hear the Gospel. And 10 years later, it was God's purpose for Paul to take the Gospel into the Praetorium, into the heart of the Empire. Paul sits chained in a Roman prison and he says four words that, if we will adopt them for ourselves, will change our perspective and release our joy. He says in verse 16, **I am put here**. Paul was not in prison because mistakes were made. Paul was not in prison because of failure, his or (certainly not) GOD'S! Paul is not in prison because God is asleep, or unable to direct my affairs, or is indifferent to them. NO! Paul has an unshakeable confidence in the providence of God, and says "I am put here," and he says it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to all the rest, that **my imprisonment is for Christ**. Oh, saints, what a powerful truth for us to live by. "I am put here." What's the hardest trial you are facing right now? We are all facing trials. Pick your hardest, and see if you can fill in the blanks. "I am put here, for my sickness is for Christ." "I am put here, for my job is for Christ." Some may even say, "I am put here, for my marriage is for Christ." Yes, it is. I am put here for the sake of the Gospel. That's the second source of Paul's joy: the advance of the Gospel. Paul's joy and God's glory is to advance the Gospel.
- We see that in Paul's reference to his ministry to the Imperial Guard. There were 9000 men hand-picked for the Imperial Guard, and it was an honor. They were paid more and were trusted more, because one of their duties was to protect the Emperor and his family. One of their other duties was to guard the Imperial prisoners. Paul made it HIS job to make sure that every man chained to him heard the reason why he was there, and that it had nothing to do with Paul. It had everything to do with Christ. You can bet that if Paul were free, and was preaching in a synagogue in Rome, these men would not come to hear him preach. God said, "OK, if they won't go to Paul, I will bring Paul to them." God has done that over and over through the centuries, and does it to this day. The Perspectives on World

Missions class we took years ago taught us there are four ways God advances the Gospel: **Voluntary Go**: The Riggsbees are leaving next week for Nepal to take medical help and the Gospel. No one is forcing them to go. Will left last week to go to Parris Island to become a Marine and to take Christ there. He signed up for suffering! (Honestly, aren't we all called to sign up for suffering, for the sake of the Gospel?) **Involuntary Go**: Christian Refugees are forced out of their country, and take the Gospel where they end up. Paul was forced to go to prison in Rome. **Voluntary Come**: Immigrants to the US or to other nations where there are believers come by the thousands, and many hear the Gospel and are saved. **Involuntary Come**: people are forced to migrate to an area where there are believers and they are influenced by faith. The Imperial Guard were forced to come and guard Paul as part of their job, just like the people you work with are forced to be in the same room with you. ☺ God brings them to you and me every day.

- Some churches, maybe some denominations, have this mission statement: "To know Him, and to make Him known." What does that mean for us? Put the Gospel first. We are not going to save the world with anything else. Are you into sports? Put the Gospel first there. Into politics? Put the Gospel first. Into making money and building a business? Put the Gospel first. Into your family? Gospel first.
- **The Disciples' Confidence**
- What has been the result in the church from Paul's imprisonment? "Most of the brothers (and the word can be translated brothers and sisters; it refers to siblings, which we are in Christ!) have become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment. That sounds strange, doesn't it? "Hey, did you hear the good news? Paul's in prison. Yeah, and I am so confident because of that! Yes, I can hardly wait to get out of bed in the morning, since Paul is in PRISON!!" No, it was not like that. But do you know what happened after Jim Elliott and the other four missionaries were speared to death by the Aucas in 1956? Thousands of young people were emboldened to take the Gospel to the mission field. The blood of the martyrs gave them confidence in the Lord. The suffering and the sacrifice of Christians around the world gives us courage to put the Gospel first. It's worth it! If you had told Elisabeth Elliot when she first met Jim in college that she would one day be a widow with a 10-month-old baby girl, and that she would go with her daughter to the tribe that killed her husband, and she would struggle and suffer there but God would lead that tribe to faith in Jesus, and then she would have another husband and he would leave her a widow, and that she would become an author and have a radio broadcast and be a platform speaker at conferences and that thousands would come to know Jesus or to love Him better because of her, she would have said, "Let it be to me according to your Word, Lord. I can go through those trials for that kind of fruit." But Elisabeth Elliot didn't know any of that when she married Jim. Listen, when we are in the middle of a trial, we don't see the fruit that will come. But our job at that time is to trust, to be joyful, and to remain faithful. Because this is the truth: God will give others confidence to trust Him more in their suffering when they see you trusting him in yours.
- But wait. What are the brothers and sisters doing with that new confidence? Paul says they are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Francis Chan tells this story about one of the pastors at the church he served. This pastor was driving down the road and saw a driver in front of him accidentally swerve and hit a man on a bicycle in the bike lane beside him. The man on the bike was ok, but furious. He ran over to the car and opened the man's door and started beating him! What would you do if you saw this, especially if the man he was beating was 75 years old? The pastor in the car behind him didn't know what to do, but finally he jumped out and tried to pull the man off the old guy. The cyclist turned and started beating him. NOW, what should he do? He asked himself, do I fight back? He did. He hit the cyclist one time and knocked him out cold. About this time the police showed up and he asked the pastor, how many times did you hit him? "Honestly, just once." "That's what everybody else said," the policeman replied. When Chan told this story in a sermon, everybody applauded. Then he said, "How many of you would have gotten out of the car to stop the assault, even if the man were bigger than you." Most nodded or raised their hands. He said, "OK, so you would have the courage to intervene, to save this poor old man." Then he said, "How many of you would go speak the gospel to a 75-year-old

man who is sitting alone in a restaurant, if you knew he was not a Christian?” No one nodded or raised his hand. Chan asked, “Why is it easier to be courageous in physical matters and not in spiritual matters? Could it be (because) speaking the Gospel is warfare?” Oh, yes, it is. But God’s glory is to advance the Gospel. His joy is to give us the courage we need to work with Him in that. He can and will give us the confidence we need. But listen!

- We are given confidence in the Lord, not in ourselves, to put the Gospel first. I finished that sentence and went to Y, and I was thinking about the sermon as I got ready for a run. I was praying that God would help me to put the Gospel first, when the door to the locker room opened. An older man (well, older than I) walked in. I don’t know if he was 75 or not, but I knew that God was giving me an opportunity to practice what I was about to preach. He brought up how hot it was outside and how much he wished Adam and Eve had never “messed up” in the Garden. He talked like a believer, but it turns out an unchurched one. We ended up having a great conversation about the Lord, His sovereignty, and the need we have for fellowship with other believers. I prayed for this man, Harvey, as I went out for a run, and I thanked God that He had made it so easy for me to talk with him about the Gospel, to put the Gospel first.
- D.A. Carson writes, “What ties us together? What do we talk about when we meet, even after a church service? Mere civilities? The weather? Sports? Our careers and our children? Our aches and pains? None of these topics should be excluded from the conversations of Christians, of course. In sharing all of life, these things will inevitably come up. But what must tie us together as Christians is this passion for the Gospel, this fellowship of the Gospel.”

- **The Rivals’ Ambition**

- I know you are not going to believe me when I tell you this, but there are some preachers who preach the good news about Jesus for the wrong reasons. Some preach from envy and rivalry, Paul said. Others from good will. There were two opposing groups in Rome, preaching the Gospel for two very different reasons. We can understand those who preached from good will, because they honestly cared about seeing others come to Christ. But what about the others, who preached from envy, rivalry, from selfish ambition, not sincerely, but seeking to cause harm to Paul? They had heard about the crowds, perhaps, that followed Paul around and they wanted in on that. It is one of the greatest struggles of any preacher, any evangelist, any pastor, to keep himself from being consumed with envy and jealousy of others. Kent Hughes tells the story from the 4th century about some demons trying to trip up a godly monk. He was a devout man, though, and nothing they tempted him with worked to draw him away from his love for Christ. The devil told the demons they had been too hard on the man. Send him good news, Satan said, the good news that his brother has just been made the bishop of Antioch. They tried this approach and the godly man fell into deep envy and bitterness of soul.
- That’s part of what was going on here in Rome. But more than that, there were men who were actually preaching the Gospel in hopes that Paul would be afflicted. They wanted to stir up the Roman authorities, perhaps, to turn up the heat on Paul, to make him suffer because of the Gospel. Remember it had been said of Paul and Silas years earlier in Thessalonica, “These are the men who have turned the world upside down.” So now the apostle who had turned the world upside down is here, chained to Roman guards, and other preachers in Rome saw that as their opportunity to do him harm, to add insult to injury. That’s hard to understand, isn’t it? It’s hard for me to even imagine...until I look at my own heart and have to admit what I will do or say sometimes to make myself look better or others look worse, for my own selfish gain. Help me, Lord! Help us.
- What does Paul say in response? I LOVE verse 18. “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.” The wrong motives of bad men do not derail Paul in the least. He rejoices that Christ is proclaimed. By the way, had these men preached another Gospel, Paul would have called that preaching “accursed.” See his letter to Galatians. But they were proclaiming Christ. They were doing the right thing with the wrong motives. Paul says, in essence, “What does that have to do with me? I’m not in charge of motives! God

alone can judge the heart.” Heart motives are NOT our domain, saints. Let’s be careful of how we judge others intentions. Let’s be careful how we judge other churches and how they “do church.” If Christ is being proclaimed there, let’s rejoice. Because we are called to put the Gospel first!