

Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

When No One Sees or The Inadequacy of Accountability

Philippians 2.12-18

6.22.14

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. ¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing; ¹⁵ so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. ¹⁸ You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me. (Phil 2.12-18)

We've been looking at The Epistle to the Philippians – this is a letter, written by the Apostle Paul when he was in jail, awaiting trial for teaching that Jesus Christ was Lord. And this necessarily implied that Caesar was NOT Lord, so Paul was accused of treason against the Roman Empire.

So Paul is writing from jail, writing to this young church, the first Christian congregation in Europe (Greece). He knows them, he calls them “Beloved” and he sees himself in partnership with them. He sees that THEY are partnered together – they're gathered together by the Invisible Hand, the secret Master of Ceremonies (C.S. Lewis). And though they are a very diverse group who may otherwise have NO affinity for one another – NOW, they have become a community of friends and at the center of their community is God and His grace. Their lives are interwoven, interdependent. They need one another in order to progress toward the Magnificent Destiny God has for them. It can't be reached except in partnership.

Today, we consider a big topic for Christians and that is “Why be good?” Why, if our acceptance with God has nothing to do with our own behavior/conduct, THEN why should we have any concern at all about our conduct? What motivates us to love, to obey? If our obeying really doesn't matter than why obey?...OR DOES it matter and if so than in WHAT way? AND while we may HOPE for a simple answer, what we get instead is an apparent contradiction – maybe not a FORMAL paradox, not NON-SENSE but one

that looks that way, one that CALLS us to live in an uncomfortable yet unavoidable tension.

Let's look at 1st) The Issue Clarified 2nd) The Issue Re-Complicated 3rd) The Issue Re-Clarified

To clarify the issue – let me steal a phrase used by the late professor Richard Lovelace and then unpack the phrase a little bit. He called it “the sanctification gap”. Sanctification is a big word for being holy...and the sanctification gap is the sad truth that there's a hole in our holiness.

See, the basic message of Christianity is that WE can only be made right with God – we can only be justified by grace. We need God to do this because we can't save ourselves. BUT the Gospel/Good News is that God, in Jesus Christ, humbled Himself. He became ONE of us, became obedient to His own laws ON BEHALF OF SINNERS.

And when God makes a person reconciled to Himself, He is actually conferring what Jesus Christ deserves on a person who doesn't deserve it. He gives ME what Jesus Christ deserves because Jesus Christ took the blame for what I deserved. When I believe/receive the grace of God, I am declared holy because of what Jesus Christ accomplished for me. I stand before God standing on another Person's record.

AND we also believe that everyone who has this hope (this confidence in Jesus Christ) is NOT only declared holy but will then actually become holy or (the bigger word) will be sanctified, will press on to BE what God has declared the believer to be – holy.

So, the old hymn Rock of Ages says, “Let the water and the blood from Thy riven side which flowed be for sin the DOUBLE-CURE, cleanse me from its GUILT AND POWER.” Grace brings a double cure: it saves me from my guilt or record of sin AND it saves me from the power of sin i.e. grace makes me holy in God's eyes and holy in practice. Declared holy in an instant and growing holy in a process.

But YOU know, you still have hang-ups and habits and spiritually and ethically you're still messed up. (Unless you're really good at lying to yourself...and there have been WHOLE movements of people who convinced themselves that they were completely HOLY and SANCTIFIED because they only wore black and white clothing or didn't smoke cigarettes or didn't fornicate or because they evangelized). But I trust that you are not that self-deceived, that you see a sanctification gap IN and AROUND you.

You have STUFF, tendencies you inherit from your parents (your spouse will tell you about those things if you're married). And the question is – how come it doesn't seem to be working? Why do so many struggle to pray? Why is generosity hard? Sexual integrity so difficult for many? Why do we pray so little – worry so much (so much fear and suspicion and debt)? Why, if this message is true don't we just naturally tell other people about it (about HIM) everyday?

Why are the ethics of American church members and leaders so similar to the lifestyles of those who are not church members? The Church is often NOT the alternative City within the city it was apparently designed to be? It doesn't look that different. Can you practice what you preach? Or would you turn the other cheek? Where is the love? That's the sanctification gap.

So that's the issue for the modern American Church and apparently for the ancient Philippian Church. But as soon as we clarify the issue the waters get murky again – murky in two ways: #1 muddled, simplistic solutions to the sanctification gap #2 muddied by the actual solution. Let me explain.

There will always be someone who has a “simple answer”. For instance, “Well your problem is your basic platform – if you tell people that new life with God comes by GRACE alone...you take away their motivation to obey.”

That was the great objection of the priests to the Protestant Reformation. And, and this may shock you to hear me say it: they may be right....in some ways. There ARE whole nations and societies where people live basically moral lives because they're working their way to heaven and trying to avoid Hell.

Some of the big, glaring moral ills and the sexy kind of sins that bother you appear totally absent from these nations... because they don't believe in grace but religion and LAW...and it can keep people in line.

The problem with that is #1 – That is SIMPLY NOT the message of Christianity and as we'll see later in this letter – it really has the effect of driving those sins underground...and does nothing for the deeper sins, the not-so-sensational sins like pride and self-righteousness.

But the emphasis HERE is on another way or bridging the sanctification gap – (perhaps closely related to leaving grace and returning to religion and Law) and that is – you can make people behave better if you just keep a good eye on ‘em!

If you create a really good system of ... (here’s the big word!) a really good system of accountability ...and WHAT, pray tell, could possibly be wrong with a good dose of accountability?

Why would a minister say anything bad (especially in THIS day and age) anything bad about accountability. Have you ever heard that great phrase, “People don’t do what’s EXPECTED – they only do what’s INSPECTED”? In other words, if you want people to perform, if you want them to behave – you gotta check up on ‘em!

And there IS of course SOMETHING to be said for accountability. You can think, I’m sure, about some real evils in our society where a lack of accountability in the schools, in government or big business or banks – where no accountability led to disaster.

Paul however, mentions, for the second time in this letter – “just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now even more in my absence” (12). In other words, these Philippian Christians are moved to obey when Paul was there to see them but somehow even MORE moved when Paul was NOT there to hold them accountable.

It’s not that accountability is bad and in some ways it’s absolutely necessary in society (e.g. I’m really glad the air traffic controllers have someone looking over their shoulders!) and it has an important place in the church – but when it comes to people who have been declared holy and their actually becoming holy in life and in character – accountability is inadequate. Fear of being caught or being embarrassed/ashamed or of being punished may motivate behavioral change but it will not change the heart, and it won’t change the real YOU.

OK – so the issue is clarified: it’s the sanctification gap; people who claim to be HOLY in the sight of God by grace but whose habits and hang-ups are not changed. The issue is re-complicated by simplistic answers like returning to earning salvation (i.e. religion) or relying on fear, peer-pressure and accountability to sort of scare you into the image of Christ – it looks effective but it’s only fear NOT real holiness and beauty....Sooooo what’s the real way and how can we clarify things ?

Well, Paul doesn't GIVE the real way without sort of re-complicating the issue. The way Paul has in mind IS not a simple 1-2-3 steps to being a holy person. His answer actually looks like a riddle – it's a kind of paradox where the truth is found in a TENSION between two apparent contradictions.

Paul's anti-formula is this: 'So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (12-13)

The thing about this that LOOKS illogical or like a paradox is that the two sides DON'T seem to match. It would seem like Paul would say, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling because God's NOT GONNA DO IT FOR YOU!"

OR it might go the other way, "relax and take it easy because God's at work in you giving you the desire and the energy to do His will"

And that's why I say – it's not a moderate, "mushy middle" that sort of takes each side half-seriously – it's a tension. Both sides are VERY STRONG statements - neither can be diluted and neither can be taken BY ITSELF.

You must exert real effort here – must follow Jesus Christ who emptied Himself of His rights for others AND YOU MUST AND CAN ONLY DO THIS IF YOU HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND ASSURANCE that a supernatural force, a Presence, a Will is working in you – "the life of God in the soul of man" (Scougal)

To live in this tension is not a simple thing – it's not neat and measurable and it's not even possible except by grace – but to stay at the center of this paradox IS the path to real character change. It enables me to fulfill obligations without grumbling or complaining as the next verse says. My obligations start to become my passions. I start to do things that may be tough and yet to do them out of JOY.

Joy gets mentioned here – it's one major theme and distinctive of THIS letter and here it comes up again. Paul says at the end, "Even if I die in here, I know this is NOT about ME or MY SUCCESS or YOURS – it's about this power, this PERSON who has stepped into history, into our lives and INTO our relationship, our community. I rejoice and share my joy with you... YOU rejoice and share your joy with me!"

Now, just a few thoughts on the issue RE-Clarified: First, we can change our surface behavior but not the real me. The NEW me is being born like a sculpture emerging from marble. AND that transformation requires my engagement predicated on the assurance that God is the sculptor.

Second, welcome accountability in your life. Ask for it. But know that it's LAW and not grace and as such has no power to change you (though it may keep you out of trouble.) Unless there's a conscious trust toward the Gospel, an assurance of God's pleasure in you because of Jesus and a confidence in God's indwelling presence our obedience will look like self-discipline and not sweet grace. "The world", says Paul needs to see not just "good people" but people becoming good under the influence of sweet grace. Listen: "prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (15-16): Gospel-powered character.

Third, beware of leaving the tension and gravitating to either consistent extreme (and we find it much easier to do that). Lee Feero told me of a young woman who was singing at a Christian conference. When she finished the speaker came up and privately complimented her. She quickly responded, "Oh that wasn't me singing – that was Jesus singing through me" And the speaker whispered to her, "Well it wasn't THAT good!"

So maybe the way we take compliments and criticisms are a good gauge of whether we are living in the tension.

Fourth, Paul is a kind of Christian agnostic, which means literally, "NOT knowing". Once again, he doesn't know whether he'll get out of prison or be "poured out as a drink offering" (as he says). But he can still be joyful in that super-stressful place. That's one evidence of being IN the tension - joy!

I've always thought the form of address in this passage is all-important. So then "my beloved". To know that we love one another – to keep affirming that – helps us to know that we are beloved of God. It's that assurance that pulls us like a magnet into God's salvation and helps us work it out.

As we pray, ask God to call YOU by that name and then respond in confidence. It's hearing that name that changes us even when remaining in the tension is not clear and easy.