



Heaven's Pattern for Earthly Living

Paul's letter to the Philippians

Scott Grant

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Heaven’s Pattern for Earthly Living: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Sermonic Commentary with discussion questions.

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The Lordship of Christ

How should we live? I remember asking myself that question when I was 13 years old. I concluded that life consisted not simply in the pursuit of happiness, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, but in the pursuit of pleasure. What do the scriptures have to say about how we should live? The book of Philippians, in particular, helps us answer the question.

The Apostle Paul wrote the letter in the early sixties of the first century to the followers of Jesus in the Macedonian city of Philippi who were suffering because of opposition and who were experiencing unrest among themselves because of “selfish ambition.” Both the suffering and the unrest were threatening the advance of the gospel. Similarly, suffering and unrest threaten the advance of the gospel today. Paul addresses the issues not by advocating the pursuit of happiness or pleasure but by urging us to follow the pattern of self-giving love modeled by Christ.

Paul’s overarching concern in this letter is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although Philippians is a relatively short letter, the word “gospel” appears more here than in any of Paul’s other letters.

What is the gospel? The gospel — and preaching, or proclaiming, the gospel — is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. To “preach the gospel” originally meant to announce good news of victory in war. In Isaiah 52:7-10, the news is that the Lord himself has won a great victory and has begun to reign (Isaiah 52:7-10). The Romans preached their own gospel. When a future emperor was born, when he came of age, and when he ascended to the throne, the Romans would announce this “gospel.”

The New Testament writers preach “the gospel of Jesus Christ,” which is also “the gospel of the kingdom” (Mark 4:23). The New Testament gospel concerns a king, Jesus, who in his death and resurrection has won a great victory over the forces of evil and now reigns over all creation (Colossians 2:15, Ephesians 1:20-23). This means “salvation” for those who welcome his reign and “judgment” for those who do not. The way Paul puts it in Philippians, it means that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” The Roman emperor was called “Lord” and “Savior.” The gospel of Jesus Christ undercuts all other claims to authority. The gospel, as it is proclaimed and lived out, is “the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16). Paul’s letter to the Philippians can help us discover, employ, and spread this power.

Questions for reflection and/or discussion follow each chapter.

Connecting with Christ to Advance the Gospel

Over the years I've spoken with several Stanford University graduates, lovers of golf, who have one serious regret about their time at the university: they didn't play the golf course. The golf course is not open to the public, but it is open to students, for ridiculously low rates. As students, they had access to one of the great golf courses of the world, and they didn't take advantage of it.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are "in Christ." We are, in a sense, residents of Christ. As residents of Christ, we have some amazing privileges. But if we are not aware of them and don't take advantage of them, we are like the Stanford student who loves golf but doesn't play the golf course.

What do we need if we are to even desire to advance the gospel, let alone be effective in advancing it? Realizing what we have in Christ and taking advantage of it is where we begin. This is where Paul also begins.

What we have in Christ

Philippians 1:1-2:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

These people live literally "in" Philippi. The letter addresses the issues they face as followers of Jesus where they live. What issues do you face as a follower or potential follower of Jesus Christ? Do you know something of suffering? Does your faith community fail to live up to your expectations? Do you hope to be part of something bigger than yourself? If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then you, too, are living in Philippi, so to speak, and this letter is addressed to you.

What do you need in Philippi? One word: Christ. In the first two verses, Paul mentions Christ three times. This letter gives us the impression, right out of the chute, that living in our Philippi has something to do with Christ. We not only dwell "in Philippi" but "in Christ Jesus." In a sense, we have dual citizenship: Philippi and Christ. Paul will later say in this letter that "our citizenship is in heaven" and leaves no question as to which is the more significant address (Philippians 4:20).

What do we have as residents of Christ that helps us as residents of Philippi? We have perspective, connection with Christ, and grace and peace.

Perspective in Christ

First, living in Christ takes us to heaven, gives us heaven's perspective on the earthly grind and therefore opens up for us a whole new world right here in Philippi. Through the scriptures, prayer, and openness to God, we seek to evaluate everything that we do, think and feel, and everything that happens to us, in light of God's perspective. I hope this letter opens up for you a new way of looking at things and creates a desire to live in a new way that involves living for the gospel. I hope it opens up for you a whole new world right here in Palo Alto, Mountain View, Sunnyvale or wherever.

Have you ever looked at a three-dimensional poster that appears to be simply a random collection of colored dots? If you look at it in just the right way, a beautiful scene emerges. The dots are actually

carefully arranged to reveal a whole new world to those with eyes to see. Living in Christ gives us eyes to see the place in which we live as being filled with possibilities for amazing adventures that feature the gospel.

Relationship in Christ

Second, living in Christ enables us to have a relationship with Christ. A while back, when I was on sabbatical, I woke up each morning with no urgent agenda. There was no job to go to — only books to read, sights to see and a wife to share them with. I had no idea what this would do for me. Thoughts, feelings and memories rose repeatedly and forcefully from within me like steam from a geyser. Dreams from the previous night would linger with me throughout the day. I journaled furiously, trying to figure out what everything meant. I came to the conclusion rather quickly that there was no way I could assign meaning to each experience. Everything was happening so fast. One thought would trigger another, and that thought would trigger another thought. It was quite overwhelming. I can now say this: I have a lot of stuff inside me, stuff I didn't know was there. There has to be a lot more stuff I don't know about. What is it? In a word, I'd call it passion.

You have a lot of passion inside you, much of which you don't know about yet. If you linger with your heart for a while, you'll feel some of it. How did it get there, and what are you supposed to do with it? Passion seeks passion. Whatever you're passionate about, be it sports, literature, computers or ministry, you love sharing your experiences with others who are passionate about the same thing. God created us with particular passions. And he has become one of us that we might relate with him on the most intimate terms. God created us with particular passions that we might share them with Jesus Christ, God the human. Our passions are the calling card of Jesus. If you have given your life to Jesus, you are "in Christ." You are connected to Christ. He's easy to find. Share your passion with him.

You might discover that one of your passions is the gospel. Once you start sharing your passions with Jesus, he shares his passions with you. His passions begin to rub off on you. If he is passionate about anything, he is passionate about people, and the way people are helped is through the gospel. Paul became passionate about the gospel because Jesus himself is passionate about the gospel. May we become similarly passionate, not because we are ordering ourselves to be passionate but because something irrepressible has risen within us as a result of our connection with Christ.

Grace and peace in Christ

Third, living in Christ means we receive grace and peace from him and the Father. Grace is unmerited favor from God extended to us in his gift of Christ. Peace, or human wholeness, results from grace. Peace is what the Israelites were looking for in the final age, when God would get together with them again. He gets together with us through his grace, the gift of Christ.

In the Philippi of this world, grace and peace can be hard to find. We are more acquainted with harshness and brokenness. Therefore, we really don't believe we can receive something without having worked for it; otherwise, we'd be very happy to receive a gift without feeling obligated. We really don't believe that there's a place that can heal our wounds and make us whole; otherwise, we wouldn't be working so hard to heal ourselves. It comes as a shock to the system that grace and peace can be found at all; that's why it's so hard to receive them. We project our experiences with humans onto God. But grace and peace can be found — sometimes in Philippi, all the time in Christ. God at this moment is extending you grace that will give you peace. He is greeting you with grace and peace, his favor and wholeness.

Henri Nouwen writes of his struggle to receive the grace of God in trying to understand that God's words, "You are my beloved son," are addressed to him:

My tendencies toward self-rejection and self-depreciation make it hard to hear these words truly and let them descend into the center of my heart. But once I have received these words fully, I am set free from my compulsion to prove myself to the world and can live in it without belonging to it. Once I have accepted the truth that I am God's beloved child, unconditionally loved, I can be sent into the world to speak and act as Jesus did.

The greatest spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God that I can be free in the world — free to speak even when my words are not received; free to act even when my actions are criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless; free also to receive love from people and to be grateful for all the signs of God's presence in the world. I am convinced that I will truly be able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its boundaries.¹

This is what grace and peace can do for us if we will accept them as gifts from God.

And so we begin

So we begin with what we have in Christ: perspective, relationship, and grace and peace. That's not all we have, but it's enough to get us started. If we appreciate and employ what has been given to us through our connection with Christ, the desire to see his gospel advanced will rise within us.

Questions

1. How do you think a heavenly perspective could help you live on earth?
2. What are you passionate about, or what do you think you might be passionate about given the right provocation?
3. If you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, what are you interested in because of your connection to him?
4. How do you react to the following quote? "The greatest spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God that I can be free in the world — free to speak even when my words are not received; free to act even when my actions are criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless; free also to receive love from people and to be grateful for all the signs of God's presence in the world. I am convinced that I will truly be able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its boundaries."

To Love and Be Loved

We all want friends. We all want to be part of a community. We come to church not only looking for God but also looking for a community. We would love to find a place where our presence kindles something in the hearts of others, and where their presence kindles something in our hearts. We hope that such things happen and we try to make them happen, but often we're disappointed.

Part of our problem may be that we're working so hard at building community that we've lost sight of why the community exists. The community exists to advance the gospel, to proclaim in word and deed that Jesus is Lord, to carry his love to an aching world. If we lose our outward focus, everything becomes about the relationships we have with each other, and surely we will find them wanting and spend all our time trying to create better relationships.

There is something that can create better relationships. Although it is a tried and true method, it usually doesn't occur to us. It usually doesn't occur to us because it's not really a method to create better relationships. It's not even a method at all, really. It's really a purpose, and that purpose is to advance the gospel. When the community has a purpose outside itself, a natural, unforced avenue is created for relationships. The entire focus isn't getting to know each other. You don't come together and say, "Ready, relate!" In the context of coming together for a greater cause, you relate. That's what happened between the Apostle Paul and the followers of Jesus in Philippi.

Philippians 1:3-8:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Extravagant feelings

Look at the ways in which Paul describes his disposition toward these people. They make him continually thankful, prayerful and joyful. He is confident in their future as partners in the gospel. Even though his feelings are extravagant, he considers them right, or appropriate. These people occupy a secure spot in his heart. He longs for them with the affection of Jesus himself.

Not only does he have such strong feelings for them, he's also eager for them to understand his strong feelings. It's one thing to have strong feelings for someone; it's another thing to express them, to let that person know how you feel. I'm sure most of us have harbored affections for someone and wondered if we could ever muster the courage to tell the person. You plan and scheme to find just the right words and just the right time. You work up to it for weeks, maybe months. Years? When everything converges just as you had hoped, you can't seem to pull the words out of your mouth. You conclude, "No, this isn't the right time and place after all." Then you start all over again. You plan and scheme and work up to it.

If you have strong feelings for someone, why is it so difficult to tell that person how you feel? You're afraid the other person won't feel the same way, and you're afraid of rejection. If your feelings are just an inkling, you probably won't risk it. But if your feelings are strong, you're more likely to find a way, however awkward, to make them known. Paul blurts it out. His feelings are such that he has to express them, even if he risks rejection.

What is it that evokes in this man such feelings and such a willingness to express them? It's not a career or a hobby or a concept. It's not a doctrine or a philosophy or a policy. It's people.

The power of partnership

Why does Paul have such feelings for these particular people? He says it's because of their "partnership in the gospel." Another way of saying this is that the Philippians "share in God's grace" as they support Paul in his efforts to advance the gospel. The word translated "share" is related to the word translated "partnership," which was a word used of business partnerships. They have signed on to advance the gospel, to proclaim and live out the truth that Jesus is Lord.

Their involvement has staying power, having continued from the first day, when Paul visited Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), until now. Having seen evidence of God's work in them and knowing that God finishes what he starts, Paul is confident that their partnership in the gospel will continue until the day of Christ Jesus, when he returns and his enthronement becomes visible to all. Specifically, they have partnered with Paul in his efforts to advance the gospel, even going as far as to stand by him as he is in prison for the faith that the gospel espouses. As Paul is in prison, the gospel itself is on trial, and he is an advocate for its defense and confirmation. Paul has been imprisoned by the powers of Rome, and Philippi is a Roman colony. The Philippians' partnership with Paul, then, is a risky one. It has expressed itself, among other ways, in funding Paul in his efforts to advance the gospel (Philippians 4:15-16).

What has created this intense relationship between Paul and these people? It's the gospel. They have all believed the good news that Jesus is Lord and have had life-transforming encounters with him. The love of Christ has been poured into their hearts to such an extent that they will now do anything for him. Jesus has given them all the greatest mission known to humanity: to advance the gospel and thereby bring the love of God to a broken world. Having been transformed by the gospel, they want to see the gospel advance. They want to see others transformed as well. They want to see the world transformed. This common desire to advance the gospel has brought them together and created these intense relationships.

Cry of the heart

The gospel, as we encounter Jesus Christ through it and partner with others to advance it, can create for us these kinds of relationships. This passage speaks to the deepest longings of our hearts. For when all pretensions are stripped away, we all simply want two things: we want to love, and we want to be loved. We want to love the way Paul does, to be thankful and prayerful and joyful and confident toward others and eager to express our feelings for them. We want to love the way the Philippians loved Paul, standing by others over the long haul in risky advocacy. We also want others to love us in these ways.

But we really wonder about ourselves. We wonder if we have it in us to love like this. We wonder if anyone else could love us like this. At one of my lowest moments, these words erupted from me: "I

want to love and be loved!” Of course, my heart had been telling me that since the day I was born. One day it just decided to scream it.

Does an answer exist for such cries of the heart? What are we to do with our hearts that want to love but don't think they can love and want to be loved but don't think they will be loved? We are to bring our hearts to Jesus Christ and to find in his gospel that we are loved more than we can possibly imagine. We are to then find, as we connect with Jesus, that he is transforming our hearts so that we are developing ever greater capacity to love and be loved. We are to seek others out who are undergoing similar transformation. We are to partner with them to advance the gospel and introduce the love of Jesus to other hearts that are crying, “I want to love and be loved!”

Then, something special happens when you partner with others to advance the gospel. Relationships happen. A common goal brings you together.

Common goal

When I look back on my childhood, I can see that I became closer to the guys I played ball with than the people I sat next to in class. When I got to college, I was closer to the people with whom I worked on the school newspaper than with than any other group. Each of you could probably tell stories of how a common goal introduced you to other people and created relationships.

Fighting a common enemy is perhaps the most unifying of goals. George C. Scott, playing the World War II general in the movie *Patton*, declares that all other human endeavors pale in comparison to war.² Patton may have been a fanatic, but the intensity of war brings people together like nothing else.

Paul uses a word common to business — “partnership” — to describe the relationships among people who come together to advance the gospel. It is like a business partnership, but it's something more. It's like a team, but it's something more. It's more like a platoon. Paul himself says elsewhere that we're in a war (Ephesians 6:10-20). It's that intense. He uses warfare language to describe our struggle against the wicked spiritual forces led by the devil, who has “blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:4). The gospel opens eyes so that people may see Jesus. We come together in our little platoons to advance the gospel so that people may see the love of Christ.

With apologies to Patton, the spiritual war for the hearts and minds of men and women is the greater human endeavor. I've played on a lot of teams. I've worked for several newspapers. I've made lots of friends along the way. But the bonds created by those efforts pale in comparison to the connections I've made in the ministries in which I've participated.

When you partner with others to advance the gospel, this spark you felt, that maybe you could love better, becomes a flame. When you're working side by side with people in the greatest human endeavor, when you find yourself in a fox hole with others in the war to advance the gospel, you find that you need each other. You can't do it alone. You don't want to do it alone. Working alone is no fun. You need others to do what you can't do, and you need others to support you and pray for you. Finding that you need each other, your hearts become open to each other. You share. You get to know each other. You feel that you've been through this “thing” together. The great gospel adventure inspires and nurtures the relationships we want.

A normal response when you suggest that people get involved with ministry is this: “I'm too busy.” Too busy for the greatest human adventure? Too busy for the relationships that we crave but can't create? If the answer is “I'm too busy,” here's a question you may consider asking yourself: “What do I

really want?” Not, “What *should* I want?” If you ask the second question, you will answer out of guilt. God speaks to a much deeper place, to a place beneath all the “shoulds” and the “oughts.” When you get below the “shoulds” and the “oughts,” what do you find? You might just find a desire to be part of an adventure that carries the love of Jesus to the world. And you’re sure to find the desire to love and be loved. Partnering with others in the name of Jesus Christ, I found that I could love. I found that I could be loved.

Asking the Lord

Consider praying in these ways: 1) Ask the Lord to use you/us to advance the gospel. 2) Ask him if there is anything he is calling you to do in order to advance the gospel.

How might the Lord answer those prayers? He might take you to a deeper place of prayer. He might lead you to pray regularly for people on the front lines in the battle to advance the gospel. You may not be an evangelist or a missionary, but someone has to pray for the evangelists and missionaries. He might lead you to a ministry. He might lead you to create a ministry. He might lead you to take a trip somewhere. He might turn your small group into a platoon. He might do something you never could have imagined. I hope he leads us to be more welcoming and more outreaching. I hope we find that we can love and be loved.

And I hope no one is left out. Three words appear together four times in this short section: “all of you.” The apostle feels strongly for all of these people because they have all partnered with him. We’re in this together.

Questions

1. If you have experienced relationships that were fostered by a common secular goal, describe the nature of these relationships.
2. If you have experienced relationships that were fostered by partnership in the gospel, describe the nature of these relationships.
3. Describe any fears you may harbor about loving and receiving love.
4. How has your connection with Jesus Christ affected your capacity to love and receive love?
5. How have you felt the need for others as a follower of Jesus Christ?
6. If you detect in yourself a desire to be part of an adventure that carries the love of Jesus Christ to the world, what might you consider doing with that desire?

The Abundant Life

The 1996 movie *Marvin's Room* has a great scene near its end. Bessie, played by Diane Keaton, has cared for her ill father and aunt for 20 years. After learning that she has leukemia, she receives a visit from her estranged sister, Lee, played by Meryl Streep. Bessie tells Lee, "I've had such love in my life." Lee says, yes, their father and aunt love Bessie very much. Bessie is taken aback for a moment. She says Lee doesn't understand. Bessie does not mean she's lucky to *be* loved; she means she's lucky *to* love.³

Lucky to love. What a perspective.

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10, New American Standard Bible). The Apostle Paul prays that the Philippians' love for each other would "abound" more and more. The verb translated "abound" in Philippians 1:9 is related to the verb translated "abundantly" in John 10:10. The abundant life that Jesus promises includes not only the love we receive from him but the love that we give others. What does an abundant life look like? It looks something like Bessie's life. One who lives an abundant life blesses others and therefore considers himself or herself blessed. How do you get such a life? Listen to Paul's prayer.

Philippians 1:9-11:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God.

The desire for love

Paul told the Philippians that he prays for them (Philippians 1:4). Here is the content of his prayer. He prays that they would be more loving toward each other. In the prayer, he describes the effects of such love and how he expects this love to be effected. This is what God wants for the Philippians, and it's what he wants for us as well. To make this real for us, let us assume that Paul is praying this for us.

He prays that our love may abound still more and more. Paul uses similar language in 1 Thessalonians 3:12 in speaking of love for each other within the family of God. Also, love for each other is one of the themes of this letter. Love for each other, which seeks the benefit of others, is what Paul is praying for here. He wants it not just to abound but to abound more — and not just to abound more but to abound "more and more." This looks to be a supernatural kind of love. And it is. If it weren't, Paul wouldn't pray for it. This kind of love is something only God can create in us.

It's not that love isn't in us. Paul indicates that he does see love in the Philippians; he just wants it to grow. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, something supernatural has already happened to you. You have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, and he has put love in your heart. Something is within you, and you know it. God wants to make this something grow. Give your heart to him, and let him work with it. Let him do his thing.

In some ways, the 1960 and 2000 presidential elections paralleled each other. Each was extremely close. In each election, one of the candidates was a sitting vice president who served for two terms during prosperous times: Richard Nixon with Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Al Gore with Bill Clinton.

How do you run against prosperity? During a 1960 debate, candidate John F. Kennedy acknowledged the prosperity of the 1950s but added, “We can do better.”

That’s what Paul is telling the Philippians. Yes, you love each other. But you can do better. We love each other. But we can do better.

Paul prays that this increase in love would be “in,” or accompanied by, “knowledge and depth of insight.” The word translated “knowledge” appears in an intensified form and is often used of the knowledge of another person. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul uses the verb to say that we will one day know God just as he now knows us. Paul is praying that our love may be accompanied by the knowledge of God. “Insight,” then, would be insight into God’s will that comes from relationship with him. Love that is rooted solely in feelings can wither, and it often doesn’t know how to help the object of its love. It just “feels.” Paul, on the other hand, prays that we would increasingly abound in a kind of love that is connected with God and has insight into his perspective.

In order for our love for one another to be connected with God and with insight into his perspective, we need to be constantly nurturing our relationship with him and constantly checking in with him.

The effect of love

Paul prays for and expects this love to have two effects.

First, this love will enable us to discern what is best. “Love is blind,” goes the saying, and a purely sentimental love can obscure what’s really happening. Likewise, infatuation and obsession, which have little to do with love, only see what they want to see. The kind of love Paul wants to see in us opens our eyes. It’s a love that seeks the best for another and for a community and, being connected with God and his perspective, eventually does what needs to be done.

This kind of love sees through the muck in another person’s life and encourages the good that is there. It sometimes compels us to make some difficult choices. We have to make sacrifices. We have to give up time and resources. We have to take risks. We have to say things that others might not want to hear. But, motivated by love, we’re willing to do these things because we appreciate not only what feels good but what’s true and important and lasting — what’s loving.

Second, this love, as it is expressed in discerning what is best, enables us to be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, when he returns and goes public with his reign. Although the blood of Christ makes us pure and blameless in God’s eyes, Paul uses similar language in Philippians 2:15 to talk about our witness to the world. His prayer is that we would be pure and blameless in the eyes of the world — that our love for each other would be such that the unbelievers watching us cannot fault us for not loving each other.

Unfortunately, some of us have had some bad experiences with faith communities. Perhaps we ourselves, as part of a faith community, haven’t been very loving. In such cases, those who don’t know Christ can justly find fault with the community or us, and the name of Christ is dishonored. On the other hand, if you find love in your faith community, those who are close to you who don’t know the Lord will know about it. They’ll see how you’re blessed. And they may want to get in on the action. If followers of Jesus love each other, that says something to the world about Jesus.

The means of love

Paul draws from horticulture to show how all this is brought about. If this kind of love abounds in us more and more and it is having these kinds of effects, we will be “filled with the fruit of righteousness

that comes through Jesus Christ.” This is fruit consisting of righteous behavior (Proverbs 2:9, 11:30; Amos 6:12), and in this context righteous behavior is loving behavior. To be filled with fruit is to abound in love for each other. We are branches, as it were, that cannot produce this fruit on our own. The fruit comes “through Jesus Christ” — it is created by him. Jesus himself tells us the same thing: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Jesus equates remaining, or dwelling, in him with dwelling in his love (John 15:9). Just as in Philippians, the fruit in John symbolizes love for one another (John 15:12).

In order to be filled with fruit, in order for our love for each other to abound more and more, we must dwell in the love of Jesus Christ. We must make our home there. The love of Jesus is where we get fed and nurtured. It’s where we rest. The love of Jesus is what we return to at the end of the day. It’s where we wake up in the morning. We return, and return frequently, to the biblical stories of Jesus’ love for us, thoughts of his love for us, and images of his love for us. We spend a lot of time at the foot of the cross.

I’ve developed a little spiritual discipline that helps me dwell in the love of Jesus. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I can’t get back to sleep because my mind is racing. At such times I have a rule for myself: I am not allowed to think of anything except how much God loves me. Of course, my mind still goes off to the races, but when I realize what’s happening, I return to thoughts of God’s love for me. Sometimes it helps me get back to sleep. Mostly it doesn’t. But even if it doesn’t, something seemingly bad (sleeplessness) has been turned into something definitely good (dwelling in the love of Jesus).

Some of you have been away from home for a long time. You’ve spent a long time away from the love of Jesus. You’ve been trying to get that need for love met in some really bad places. It’s time to come home.

If we make our home in the love of Jesus, his love will enter us and transform us, and our love for each other will abound more and more. We’ll be filled with fruit. The branches will be bent over from the weight of all the fruit they’re bearing. We’ll be saying, “I love so much I don’t know if I can take it anymore.” But we will take it. The fruit will be just falling from us in order to make room for more fruit. It will just keep coming, and no one will be able to stop it. There will be enough love for everyone. More than enough. Love will abound.

This kind of love among us brings glory and praise to God. He created us to love, and when we do love, we are fulfilling his purpose for us. If anything fulfills its design, it brings glory to the designer. If you are enthralled with a work of art, you don’t praise the artwork; you praise the artist. Here, then, is a very simple way to bring glory to God. Do you want to glorify God? Love someone.

We’re here to pray

The content of Paul’s prayer shows us what God desires: to see love for one another abound in us. It shows us some things we need to do to cooperate with God. But we cannot make love abound. We cannot make fruit. Only God can.

In order to connect with God’s desires for us, we have assumed that Paul is praying for us. Of course, Paul isn’t here to pray for us. But we’re here. We’re here to pray for us. We can pray this for ourselves and for each other.

O God, we pray that our love for each other may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of

Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God.

What would happen if God answered this prayer? What would it mean for the advance of the gospel? What would happen if the Spirit descended and the fruit just started falling from each of the branches by the bushel? What if something supernatural happened? What if out there they heard about all the fruit that's in here? What if we took some of the fruit to them? We can dream, can't we?

Questions

1. How specifically and practically might you go about loving others in the family of God?
2. How have people you know outside the family of God been influenced by your involvement with it?
3. How might you go about dwelling in the love of Christ?

Inspirational Perspective on Life

In the original *Star Trek* television series, Captain Kirk would often find himself in dire straits. Sometimes he would lose communication with the Enterprise. When someone would re-establish contact with him and ask concerning his welfare, he would invariably answer, “Never mind me! What about my ship?”

Although I hesitate to compare the Apostle Paul to Captain Kirk, Paul’s perspective on life was similarly focused. If someone inquired as to his welfare, we might picture him saying, “Never mind me! What about the gospel?” His passion in life was to advance the gospel, the proclamation concerning the glorious reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul didn’t seem to worry so much about the dire straits in which he found himself as long as the gospel was advancing.

The passage before us today is an invitation for us to adopt Paul’s perspective on life. Paul’s story serves as inspiration for us to evaluate everything that happens to us in light of the advance of the gospel.

What happens to Paul

Philippians 1:12-14:

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Paul has been imprisoned by the Roman authorities for preaching the gospel. Although it would seem that imprisoning such a leader would impede the advance of the gospel, Paul reports that it has had the opposite effect. The gospel has advanced in two ways. First, the reason for Paul’s imprisonment has become clear, both to those charged with guarding Paul and to others where he is being held. Second, followers of Jesus in the city where he is imprisoned are “speaking the word of God,” which he defines as preaching, or proclaiming, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel has advanced in that non-believers have become aware of Christ and that believers are proclaiming Christ.

Paul doesn’t report any conversions. The gospel will do its own work. We can therefore be thankful anytime someone becomes aware of Christ or any time that Christ is proclaimed, regardless of how the hearers respond.

Paul’s imprisonment, intended to frighten followers of Jesus, has actually served to inspire them. They’ve been inspired to trust in the Lord and have thereby found more courage. Although the risk has become greater as they have become bolder, they are proclaiming the gospel without fear. They are willing to be imprisoned for the sake of Christ, just like Paul.

Paul has been imprisoned, but the gospel is walking forward, unhindered. Paul’s imprisonment is, literally, “in Christ,” the Messiah, the Jewish king. The brothers and sisters who are proclaiming Christ are trusting in the Lord. Caesar would claim the titles king and lord. The Roman king and lord, the apparent king and lord of the whole world, could imprison the primary preacher of the gospel, but the

gospel nevertheless was marching forward to penetrate the palace guard, where Caesar's power resided. This is a war between kings, a war between lords, and the Jewish King and Lord, the true King and Lord of all creation, is winning in a very strange way.

What happens to us

The kings and lords of the earth would imprison the gospel, but it will not be imprisoned, and just as it advanced through what happened to Paul, it will advance through what happens to us. Paul specifically tells his readers that he wants them to know about how the gospel has advanced because of his imprisonment. The reason he wants them to know is so that they can learn from what has happened to him. They live in Philippi, a Roman colony, and they are also facing persecution (Philippians 1:28-30). God specifically inspired Paul to write this so that we, too, would know of Paul and learn from his example.

Paul describes what has happened to him. He's been imprisoned. What has happened to you? Has your journey been an easy walk in the park, or have you experienced some confining moments that have made you feel as if you're in a prison? The evil one aims to imprison us: if not physically, then emotionally; if not obviously for faith in Jesus, then secretly for faith in Jesus. Perhaps you feel as if you've been imprisoned by a culture that marginalizes followers of Jesus and seemingly keeps you from wanting the right things.

If you're in a prison of some kind, you should be on the edge of your seat to watch how God uses your circumstances to advance the gospel. Perhaps you've already seen the gospel advance in some way. Perhaps others have seen you suffer and cling to Christ. Perhaps others have been or will be encouraged by your faith and will tell others about Jesus. Perhaps your prison experience has taken you to a dark place where you have seen the brightness of Jesus more clearly and others have been drawn to the light they see in you. Perhaps what happens to you will serve to inspire others. There's no telling how the hand of God will transform your "imprisonment" into the advance of the gospel. Be on the lookout for such transformations, for when you see one, you're seeing the hand of God, and you're seeing yourself as his instrument.

When I was in my mid-twenties, a knee injury I suffered as a teen-ager began to bother me. My biggest passion when I was younger was sports. You name it, I played it. Into my mid-twenties I continued to play in various leagues. But as my knee caused me more pain, I had to curtail my activity. I could not do what I wanted to do. I felt as if I were in a prison. And then I had to figure out what I was going to do with the time that I previously spent on the field or in the gym. That's when I started studying the scriptures. That's when I began teaching Bible studies. I've been studying and teaching and preaching ever since. Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

We see in verses 12 through 14 that the gospel advances through Paul's imprisonment. In verses 15 through 18a, we see how he values the advance of the gospel.

Stupefying response

Philippians 1:15-18a:

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

For Paul, the advance of the gospel (verse 12) takes place as the word is spoken (verse 14), which he further defines as preaching, or proclaiming or announcing, Christ (verses 15, 17 and 18). For Paul, the content of the gospel is the person of Christ. Paul speaks here not of proclaiming Jesus but proclaiming Christ. “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Messiah,” a kingly title. When the gospel is proclaimed, the reign of Jesus Christ is proclaimed.

Although brothers and sisters have risen to preach the gospel in Paul’s place, the motives of some of them are less than pure. Some preach out of goodwill, love for Paul, sincerity and true motives. Others perceive Paul to be a rival and have reacted to his imprisonment in a different way. They’ve sensed an opportunity to discredit Paul and leap past him. They preach out of envy, rivalry, selfish ambition and false motives. Perhaps they view Paul’s imprisonment as God’s judgment on him. They are hoping that their success will make Paul jealous. Those who preach because they love Paul “know” that he has been appointed by God for the defense of the gospel. Those who preach because they consider Paul a rival only “suppose” that they can stir up trouble for Paul.

The plan to imprison Paul backfires. It was designed to contain the gospel but instead advances it. The plan of those who preach Christ out of rivalry also backfires. They were hoping to trouble Paul. Instead, he rejoices. The way in which Christ is preached doesn’t seem to concern him, even if that way is aimed at causing him difficulty. What concerns him is the advance of the gospel, and if that comes at the expense of his own reputation, so be it. He can’t possibly enjoy being treated in this way. However, the advance of the gospel is more important to him than how he’s treated.

In verses 12 to 14, we saw that Paul seemed unconcerned with the difficulties of his imprisonment in light of the advance of the gospel. Such an outlook is remarkable. In verses 15 to 18, we see that Paul seems unconcerned that others see him as a rival and are hoping to defeat him, so to speak, and kick him when he’s down. He’s not only unconcerned by such a turn of events, he also rejoices because of them. Such an outlook is stupefying.

A change in values

Again, Paul is telling his own story in order to be instructive. Some in the city where he is imprisoned are preaching Christ out of “selfish ambition.” Later in this letter, Paul tells the Philippians to do nothing out of “selfish ambition” (Philippians 2:3). His own story shows them how they should respond and how they shouldn’t respond. How should we respond?

Let’s say you’re a manager for a company. One of the other managers is a consummate back stabber and stair climber. There’s nothing he wouldn’t stoop to and no one he wouldn’t step over to get where he’s going. You’ve worked hard to make your group and your company successful. One day you’re called into your manager’s office and he has some bad news for you. He says your group is being taken over by the back stabber and that your services are no longer needed. You’re fired. The back stabber begins leading your former group and tells everyone what a crummy manager you were and that the company will be more successful without you. And you say, “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, the company is successful. And because of this I rejoice.”

Well, you probably wouldn’t say this. You could only say this if the success of the company were more important than your feelings, your livelihood and your reputation. How about the advance of the gospel? How important is that to us? If I were thrown in prison for preaching Christ and someone

took my place and began preaching Christ and bad-mouthing me at the same time, will you find me rejoicing? I have to confess: I think I'm more concerned with my feelings and my reputation than the advance of the gospel. I think I'm more concerned with my name than the name of Christ. I'm more inclined to rejoice at my advancement than the advancement of the gospel.

What's wrong with me? My values are misplaced. How do I bring myself to value the right things? Once upon a time, Paul's values were misplaced as well. Earlier in his life, he was the one who was imprisoning followers of Jesus (Acts 9:2). God had to strike him blind before he realized that he had been blind all along — that his values were upside down (Acts 9:1-19). Paul was on the road to Damascus to imprison followers of Jesus when he came to understand that he was on the wrong road. Is there anything in this passage that makes you think that your values are misplaced? Is there anything that makes you think you're on the wrong road? God probably isn't striking any of us blind today, but is he perhaps showing us that we have been blind — that we have been on the road to personal advancement instead of the road to gospel advancement? If so, that realization is a start. It's the place Paul started. If we want to change what we value, we must begin with the realization that our values are skewed and with prayers that God would change our hearts.

Desire for joy and courage

What else in this passage encourages us to change our perspective on life so that we view it through the lens of the gospel?

We see Paul filled with joy, despite his circumstances, because the gospel advances. The advance of the gospel causes him joy. We know that the gospel will advance. Jesus is Lord of all creation, and one day all creation will know it and he will vanquish every speck of evil. If we value the advance of the gospel, we will rejoice when we see glimpses of Jesus defeating evil, and we will jump out of our skins when we see him finish the job (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). If you want joy, place supreme value on the advance of the gospel.

The passage reveals other examples for us in this passage besides Paul. Those who were inspired by Paul and proclaimed the gospel courageously and fearlessly also serve as examples. Do you want to become courageous and fearless? We use fear to protect us from things that we think will do us harm. The way to deal with fear is to find something that's worth the risk you take in exposing yourself to whatever you think will harm you. In order to be courageous, you have to find something worth being courageous for. For the people inspired by Paul, that thing was the advance of the gospel.

Something changed for the brothers and sisters of verse 14. Something can change for us as well. Triggered by Paul's imprisonment, they, literally, "trusted in the Lord" and found greater courage. Perhaps something will trigger you to trust in the Lord. Paul's story, the stories of these brothers and sisters, or the story of a modern-day Paul may be such a trigger.

Look at these stories. Do you want this kind of life? Are you tired of deadness? Are you tired of fear? Do you feel a desire for joy and courage welling up in you? Does it feel as if a trigger is being pulled? When the trigger is pulled, you are propelled toward the Lord. He shows you what's important. Your values begin to change. You embrace the gospel as your cause. You rejoice when the gospel advances. You find that the gospel is greater than what causes you fear. The Lord sends you out with greater courage borne out of greater trust, and you proclaim in word and deed that Jesus is Lord.

The gospel is it

Give your heart to the gospel. Hitch your boxcar to a train that's going somewhere, and enjoy the ride.

Some of you may not yet believe the gospel at all, but perhaps you want to believe in something that's worth more than what you're believing in now — something that will inspire you, fill you with joy and lift you out of your fear. The gospel is it. Jesus is Lord. Give your life to him.

Questions

1. How have you felt “imprisoned” in life?
2. What spiritual benefits, if any, have you seen proceed from your “imprisonment”?
3. How do you think your values have been misplaced?
4. What has God done to bring about a shift in your values?
5. How does Paul’s perspective on imprisonment affect you?

To Live is to Desire Christ

Hamlet, in his famous soliloquy authored by Shakespeare, is contemplating suicide when he says “to be or not to be.” If he is to live, he would have to continue suffering “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” If he is to die, he would leave “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” Yet he is worried about the ills he may have to bear after death: “what dreams may come” in the “undiscover’d country.” As he contemplates his two options, Hamlet worries that he may be staring at a lose-lose scenario. If he lives, he loses. If he dies, he loses.

Some 1,500 years before Shakespeare, the Apostle Paul penned something of a soliloquy himself. He wrote himself into the play, so to speak, and crafted for himself a part similar to that of Hamlet. He was not contemplating suicide, but he was contemplating life and death, to be or not to be. Unlike Hamlet, however, Paul envisioned a win-win scenario: “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

This is the blessed scenario for all those who follow Jesus Christ. It’s win-win. If you live, you win. If you die, you win. And in this scenario, we find out how we bring glory to Jesus Christ, the author of life.

The exaltation of Christ

Philippians 1:18b-20:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Paul told the Philippians that, despite his difficult circumstances, he was rejoicing because the gospel was being proclaimed (verse 18a). Now he tells them he will continue to rejoice. He explains the reason for his ongoing disposition in verses 19 and 20. As it turns out, the reason he expects to continue rejoicing is the same reason he is presently rejoicing. He will continue to rejoice because Christ will be exalted. His source of joy is the proclamation and exaltation of Christ, which amount to the advance of the gospel (verse 12).

The prayers of the Philippians will result in, literally, the “provision of the Spirit of Christ,” which is not what the Holy Spirit provides but the Holy Spirit himself. Paul expects the Philippians’ prayers to activate the Spirit in him. Then, he says, “what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” — literally, “my salvation.” Here Paul uses the words of Job, who was responding to the contention of his “comforters” that his condition resulted from sin (Job 13:16, Septuagint translation of the Old Testament). Job anticipates taking his case to God, and he equates his mere ability to appear before God as “my deliverance,” for a godless man wouldn’t dare to appear before him. Paul sees himself in the Job tradition: as a righteous man suffering persecution but trusting in God’s justice.

What, then, is the “salvation” that Paul expects? It could be his anticipated release from prison (verse 25). It could be the vindication from God he expects to receive upon death. Although either or both of these aspects could be in view, Paul seems more concerned with something else in verses 12 through 26: the advance of the gospel.

Verse 20 is actually a continuation of the sentence that begins in verse 18. Paul knows that what has happened to him will turn out for his salvation, literally, “according to my eager expectation and hope” that Christ will be exalted. This will happen as the prayers of the Philippians and the subsequent provision of the Spirit strengthen him so that he trusts God and courageously defends the gospel at his trial. Thus, Christ will be exalted in his body, whether he lives or dies — whether he is released from prison or executed. If Christ is exalted, Paul is saved, or vindicated, along with the gospel. The exaltation of Christ is so important to Paul that he calls it “my salvation.”

In verse 12, Paul wanted the Philippians to “know” that his imprisonment had served to advance the gospel. Now, he says he knows that his imprisonment will exalt Christ, which means that the gospel will advance.

The verb translated “exalted” means “to make large” or “to magnify.” It is related to the word that is translated “magnificent.” When Christ is exalted, he is shown to be large and seen to be large, so to speak. His magnificence is revealed and becomes evident. Paul eagerly expects and hopes that Christ will be shown to be magnificent by his release or his execution.

This is a wonderful thing for us to hope for — that Christ will be shown to be magnificent in our lives, whether we live or die. It is so wonderful, in fact, that we can call it our salvation.

But how is this wonderful thing to come about? Paul explains in the next section.

The desire for Christ

Philippians 1:21-24:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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.

It’s important to note that verse 21 begins with the word “for.” Paul is explaining how Christ will be exalted in his body. His explanation is offered in two lines that are succinct and beautiful in their poetic structure. He says, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Transliterated, the heart of it looks like this:

to zen Christos (to live Christ)
to apothanein kerdos (to die gain)

The lack of a verb demonstrates clarity of purpose, and the assonance — the near rhyme — between *Christos* and *kerdos* demonstrates connection.

But what does it mean? Paul explains what it means in the ensuing verses. “To live is Christ” means a life of fruitful labor. The fruit is the Philippians’ “progress and joy in the faith.” “To die is gain” means departing and being with Christ. Unlike Hamlet, Paul knew where he was going. The word translated “gain” also appears in Philippians 3:7-11:

But whatever was to my profit [same word] I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and

the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

From Philippians 1, we see that Paul expected to gain Christ in death. From Philippians 3, we see that he has already gained Christ. From Philippians 1, we see that gaining Christ means being with Christ. From Philippians 3, we see that gaining Christ means knowing Christ. So really, Paul is saying the same thing in each line. To live is Christ and to die is Christ. To live is gain and to die is gain. To live is to gain Christ and to die is to gain Christ. To live is to know Christ, and to die is to know Christ. For him, life and death are all about knowing Christ. In life, he knows Christ in part; in death, he knows Christ fully (1 Corinthians 13:12). The difference is that in Philippians 1, Paul spells out what he does in this life as a result of knowing Christ: he does the work of Christ.

Paul “desires” to be with Christ. This desire to know Christ and to be with him, whether in life or death, is what exalts Christ. He expects that either his life or his death will reveal that he desires to be with Christ, to gain Christ, to know Christ. Paul exalts Christ by desiring Christ.

This is why John Piper can say in his book *Desiring God* that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”⁴ It is also why he suggests a change the old confession that reads, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Piper thinks it should read, “The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.”⁵

We exalt Christ by desiring Christ. That’s how we demonstrate the magnificence of Christ. Others see that Christ is so magnificent that he’s worth desiring more than anything else.

Let us say that desire is a good thing. To want is to be human. To live is to want, and to die is to want. Pregnant within all our desires is the potential to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. Can’t you feel desire in you? You may have deadened it because it has disappointed you or because you’ve been taught that to be a follower of Jesus is to kill your desires. But no matter what we’ve done to it, desire still lurks within us.

Think for a minute about our sexual desires. The desire for sexual gratification is a deep part of our humanity. It is strong and powerful and overwhelming — and good and holy and beautiful. We know from scripture that this desire is intimately connected with, and representative of, our desire for Christ (1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Ephesians 5:22-33, Revelation 19:7-9). When you feel sexual desire, say to yourself, “This is how much I want Christ.” For to desire Christ is to exalt Christ.

Writer John Eldredge worries that Christ isn’t being exalted by contemporary followers because they really don’t want anything very exciting:

To be blunt, nothing about our lives is worth asking about. There’s nothing intriguing about our hopes, nothing to make anyone curious. Not that we don’t have hopes; we do. We hope we’ll have enough after taxes this year to take a summer vacation. We hope our kids don’t wreck the car. We hope our favorite team goes to the World Series. We hope our health doesn’t give out, and so on. Nothing wrong with any of those hopes; nothing unusual, either. Everyone has hopes like that, so why bother asking us? It’s life as usual. Sanctified resignation has become the new abiding place of contemporary Christians. No wonder nobody asks. Do you want the life of any Christian you know?⁶

To want Christ — this is to exalt Christ. To feel a heart-wrenching longing for Christ — this is to exalt Christ. To beg God to give you intimacy with Christ — this is to exalt Christ. To cherish Christ, to savor Christ, to revel in Christ — this is to exalt Christ. To want Christ and, having found him, to want more of him — this is to exalt Christ. All this demonstrates his magnificence.

We may tend to think that to live is Christ plus a whole bunch of other things. That's not what Paul says. He says to live is Christ. Asaph writes of the Lord in Psalm 73:25-26:

*Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

When you say that to live is Christ and to die is gain, you're saying that you want Christ not for what he gives you but for himself. You're saying you want him so that you may know him. And when you say that, you exalt Christ. If we adopt Paul's poetic motto, we will find a succinct and beautiful purpose for our lives that brings glory to our Lord.

Paul, of course, does not see himself as having a choice in whether he lives or dies. The Roman authorities, under the sovereignty of God, will make that decision. To explain how he exalts Christ, however, he speculates on which he would pick if he were given a choice. Death is "better" for him, but life is "necessary" for the Philippians. He's willing to give up what is better for him in favor of what's necessary for them. This is the Philippians paradigm — the giving up of privileges for the sake of others — modeled by Paul (Philippians 1:12-26, 3:4-14), Timothy and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:19-30), and most supremely Christ (Philippians 2:5-11). Life, then, is the scenario Paul envisions.

The desire for others

Philippians 1:25-26:

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

Paul somehow knows that he will remain alive. He doesn't specify how he knows this, but he does suggest that the knowledge that he will remain is connected to his awareness of their need. Perhaps God has told Paul that he will be released from prison so that he can continue serving people who need to hear or be nurtured in the gospel. God first led Paul to Philippi by giving him a vision of a man from Macedonia, the region of Philippi, who begged him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). In that case, God showed Paul the need, and he carried the gospel to Philippi.

For Paul, life means knowing Christ and "fruitful labor." He expects his labor to be fruitful among the Philippians in that it results in their "progress and joy in the faith," which is the "faith of the gospel" (verse 27). This is the faith that the gospel espouses, which is faith in Christ. To progress in the faith and to rejoice in the faith is to want Christ more and to know him better.

Paul also expects to be released from prison so that, literally, the Philippians' "boasting may abound in Christ Jesus" through his coming to them again. When they see that Paul has been released from prison, they will be able to boast in or praise Christ for what he has done for Paul — and for them, in bringing Paul to them again.

If we're going to live, what are we going to live for? To live for the sake of knowing Christ is primary. But if you live for the sake of knowing Christ, something is going to happen as a result of that relationship. You're going to want to engage in the "fruitful labor" of the kingdom. You're going to want to live for the progress and joy of others.

When Lord Shaftersby, who campaigned for social improvement in England in the 19th century, approached death, he said this: “When I feel old age creeping upon me and know that I must soon die — I hope it is not wrong to say it — I cannot bear to leave this world with all the misery in it.”

He didn’t want to escape the misery; he wanted to help others in their misery. How unlike Hamlet, who thought of killing himself to end “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” But how like Paul, wanted to depart this world not to escape it but to gain Christ, but who also saw his continuance as necessary for the sake of others.

Our little corner of the world contains enough misery to break our hearts a thousand times over. Let us not run from it. Let us enter it with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us awake each morning with the knowledge that God has given us another day to move toward Christ and to help others move toward him. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ and you are alive today, God sees your life as “necessary” for others. Who are those others? Seek them out, and show them the love of Christ.

One pure and holy passion

To live is not Christ plus a whole bunch of other things. To die is not to escape. To live is Christ, and to die is gain. If we live, we win. If we die, we win.

May a hunger and thirst and passion for Christ sweep through us and rise up in us to exalt our Lord, and may we be renewed in our desire to engage in the fruitful labor of the kingdom so that others might desire Christ more and know him better.

Give me one pure and holy passion
Give me one magnificent obsession
Jesus, give me one glorious ambition for my life
To know and follow hard after You

To know and follow hard after You
To grow as Your disciple in the truth
This world is empty, pale, and poor
Compared to knowing You, my Lord
Lead me on, and I will run after You⁷

Questions

1. How do you react to this statement: “We exalt Christ by desiring Christ”?
2. What “fruitful labor” do you envision for yourself?
3. How are you influenced by the knowledge that God sees your life as “necessary” for others?
4. Reflect on the win-win scenario that followers of Jesus enjoy: If you die, you win (you go to be with the Lord); if you remain, you win (you enjoy fruitful labor). How does this perspective help you?

Living in a Manner Worthy of the Gospel

One morning I woke up with a vivid memory of something that happened 20 years ago. I think the Lord gave me the memory because he was showing me something about myself.

I was the shortstop on a softball team. We had a one-run lead in the bottom of the last inning. The other team's best hitter was up. He hit a screaming line drive to left-center field. It looked as if it would be a home run. Our left-fielder ran down the ball. I positioned myself for the cutoff. He threw a perfect strike to me. As I turned around to make the throw to home, I saw the runner rounding third and realized that we had a chance to get him if my throw was good. My throw was on the money. The catcher applied the tag. The runner was out, and we won the game.

Nothing happened to trigger the memory. I hadn't thought of that play in many years. I just woke up with it. I lingered with the memory for several moments and found that I was very fond of it. I enjoyed the memory so much because in it people came together for a common purpose and everyone did his part. For one poetic moment, everything came together. I think God gave me that memory to show me my heart for the church. I want us to come together to worship the Lord and advance the gospel. I want everyone to have a part and do it. I want everything to come together in a poetic movement of the Spirit of God.

The gospel announcement that Jesus is Lord is a powerful force in the world. The Apostle Paul calls it the "power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16). It is powerful to save. It is also powerful to bring under its banner people of vastly different backgrounds who set aside differences and then together take up its cause. The call of Philippians 1:27-30 is to live — together, as a community — in a manner worthy of the gospel.

Philippians 1:27-30:

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.

Living worthy of the gospel

Paul turns from his situation (Philippians 1:12-26) to the situation of his readers. He wants the Philippian believers to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. The word translated "conduct yourselves" means to "live as a citizen." It is related to the word translated "citizenship" in Philippians 3:20, where Paul says that "our citizenship is in heaven." In Philippians 1, then, Paul is telling them to live as citizens of heaven. Philippi was a Roman colony, and its residents were Roman citizens. Roman citizenship carried with it prized privileges, but Paul is telling his readers that they have an even more prized citizenship.

Such citizens should be inspired to live in a way that demonstrates the worth of the gospel. It is the “gospel of Christ,” the Messiah, the King. It’s the good news that Jesus is Lord of all creation. Those making this proclamation should live in a way that validates it.

Living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ presupposes that we have found worth in the gospel. Our capacity to live worthy of the gospel of Christ is commensurate to the worth we ourselves have found in it. If we don’t live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, perhaps it’s because we consider it cheap rather than priceless. If we value other things more than Christ, that will show up in the way we live. And if the way we live shows that we have devalued Christ, so to speak, it’s time for a reassessment.

How much is the gospel of Christ worth? Everything you were made for, everything you want, every dream you’ve ever had, whether you know it or not, is answered in the gospel announcement that “Jesus is Lord.” Relationship, significance, security — it’s all there, and it’s there forever. Citizens of heaven value what heaven values: Jesus Christ and his gospel.

What living worthy of the gospel entails

Paul proceeds to describe what it means to live as citizens of heaven in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. For his purposes, it means three things: 1) Standing firm in one Spirit. 2) Contending as one person for the faith of the gospel. 3) Not being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. Having already drawn on a metaphor from civic life, Paul now invokes military (“stand firm”) and athletic (“contending”) images.

The word translated “stand firm” was used of soldiers who stood their ground no matter how severe the battle. The battle is for the gospel. The word “spirit” is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit, who is the source of unity (Ephesians 2:18, 4:4; 1 Corinthians 12:13). It is the Holy Spirit that makes us one. To stand firm in one Spirit, then, is to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit to make us one as we fight for the gospel.

The word translated “contending” means to contend with others, side by side, as athletes on a team. Paul uses the word “one,” calling for unity. The image is that of a team that works so well together that it appears to function as one person. The team goal is the “faith of the gospel” — the faith in Christ that the gospel espouses.

In this battle and in this contest, opposition abounds. In the case of the Philippians, the opposition is Rome. The gospel proclamation that Jesus is Lord confronted the Roman claim that Caesar is Lord. All the worldly power was on the side of Rome, which could — and did — imprison and execute followers of Jesus. Yet Paul says living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ means not being intimidated by Rome.

What does it mean for us to live as citizens of heaven in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ?

The military and athletic metaphors suggest that we have a goal, that we are opposed and that we are in a struggle. The goal is the advance of the gospel. To live in a Roman colony such as Philippi was to bring the influence of Rome to that region. To live in a heavenly colony is to bring the influence of heaven to earth. We bring the gospel proclamation, the good news that Jesus is Lord and all that it entails, to a hurting world that needs such news. Yet we are opposed by a wicked world system, orchestrated by Satan, that rejects the lordship of Jesus Christ. We bump up against such opposition at every turn — and every time we turn on the television set, for that matter. The world system, as it manifests itself where we live, says, “Be your own lord.” On the one hand, we are resisted when we announce that Jesus is Lord. On the other hand, we are assaulted with the temptation to reject our

own announcement and live as lords of our own lives. The world system endeavors to silence us or absorb us.

The struggle would seem hopeless if not for the fact that God has given us each other. We come together because we have all found worth in Jesus Christ. We have found so much worth in him that we want to bring his love to the world. The gospel is worth fighting for. It's also worth uniting for. You can't follow Jesus for very long in this world before coming to the conclusion that you need to be part of a community of fellow followers and that if you are to "contend for the faith of the gospel," you need to do it as part of a community. To invoke Paul's images, you need to be part of a city, part of a military unit, part of a team. It isn't "me against the world." It's the community bringing to the world the news it needs to hear. It gets a little messy at times because we're all different, but our common love for Christ and our common desire to bring his love to the world motivate us to live and work together.

Let's bring Paul's metaphors up to date. You can get in the Army fairly easily these days. Not many people really want to be in the Army, so the Army recruits people. There are lots of people who'd like to play on a professional sports team, but there aren't many of those jobs available. When I was in school, many of the guys that I grew up with wanted to play on one of the teams but didn't make the cut. The community of God, which comes together to advance the gospel, is different. Everyone makes the cut, and our mission is the greatest one ever given to anyone, anywhere: to make disciples of all nations. Everyone who wants to be on the team is on the team. And everyone who wants to get in the game can get in the game. For you to feel things out may take some time, but opportunities abound for front-line ministry and ministry that supports those on the front lines.

The community strengthens you, and you strengthen the community. We spur each other on. We encourage each other to stay in the fight. And the Holy Spirit helps us as he teaches us the truth, humbles us, causes us to set aside our differences and helps us find our place — in short, as he empowers us to be a united front in the advance of the gospel. As a community, we make belief in the gospel possible for the world.

What living worthy of the gospel indicates

Paul then uses imagery from the legal system to say that this three-fold way of living as a citizen of heaven will serve as a "sign" from God of destruction for opponents. The fact that we as a community continue to present the gospel to the world, which can't silence us or squeeze us into its mold, is a sign that something of God is at work among us. It's a sign that opponents are on the road to eternal destruction, away from the presence of God (2 Thessalonians 1:9), and is therefore offers them an opportunity to repent.

Paul earlier talked about, literally, "my salvation," equating it with the exaltation of Christ through Paul's boldness, which would serve to vindicate him and his faith (Philippians 1:19). Now he talks about "your salvation." The boldness of the Philippians to live in a manner worthy of the gospel is here equated with salvation. Through our boldness, God vindicates us and our faith and assures us of our eternal destiny.

What living worthy of the gospel produces

Beginning with the word translated "for" in verse 29, Paul gives further incentive for living in a manner worthy of the gospel. The sign of salvation — boldness to live worthy of the gospel — is from God. Something else also comes from God: suffering. When we continue to advance the gospel in the face of opposition, we will likely suffer. Paul says that such suffering is a gift. It has been "granted"

to us. He speaks as if suffering is something to be received with gratitude. We can only appreciate suffering this way if we see it as a gift “on behalf of Christ” and “for him.”

God has left us here in the place of Christ, as his representatives. Of course, it’s not as if Christ isn’t here. He’s with us and in us, through his Spirit, to empower us to be like him in the world. That means he empowers us to suffer as he did. How did he suffer? He suffered for the world that the world might live. We bring the gospel to the world — a world that needs it but for the most part doesn’t want it. We face opposition. We suffer, bringing the gospel to a world that is opposed to it, that the world might live (1 Corinthians 4:13, 2 Corinthians 4:12). Our willingness to suffer in this way demonstrates the worth of the gospel and our love for the world. If the people of the world see that we’re willing to suffer for them to give them something we think is priceless, they’ll be more likely to see it as priceless as well.

How is such suffering a gift from God? Anything that God gives us to do on behalf of Christ is a gift. Christ suffered for us. The opportunity to suffer for him has to be considered a gift. He’s worth it. So is the world. On the one hand, we hate suffering. On the other hand, we are hungry to believe in something that’s worth suffering for. Christ is it.

The apostles understood suffering as a gift. After being arrested and flogged for preaching Christ, they rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace” for Christ (Acts 5:51). That’s how much they valued Christ. We can pray that we too would value Christ so that we might receive suffering for him as a gift from God.

The Philippians saw Paul suffer for Christ when he first came to their city. He was beaten and imprisoned for preaching the gospel in Philippi (Acts 16:19-24). And he is currently in prison as he writes this letter. As elsewhere in the letter, Paul holds himself up as an example, and he does so here to show that he and they are together in this.

Standing firm

Paul’s challenge is to live as a citizen of heaven, which means to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, which means to stand firm and contend for the gospel as a community. Are we going to be a community worthy of the gospel? The gospel is worth it.

Questions

1. What worth have you found in the gospel announcement that Jesus is Lord?
2. How do you think you are affected by the world system that proclaims, “Be your own lord”?
3. How have you felt the need for community as a follower of Jesus?
4. How has your faith community encouraged you?
5. Consider how you might view suffering for Christ as a gift from God.

The Gospel: The Banner We Rally Behind

A television commercial pictured some people in a company gathered for a meeting. An awkward silence fills the room until someone says, “Who called this meeting?” No one answers. Someone else says, “I’m out of here.” And they all leave. This is a very sad picture of what church is like for some people. We meet together over and over again. It becomes a routine to the point that we forget why we came together in the first place. Then some of us ask a questions like, “Who called this meeting?” No one has a good answer, so some of us say, “I’m out of here.”

Who called this meeting? God did. Why are we here? We are here because we love the Lord Jesus Christ and want to know him and worship him and follow him until every tongue confesses that he is Lord. That’s a good reason for showing up, isn’t it? It’s also a vision worth uniting for. Philippians 2:1-4 gives us this vision. It places the gospel before us as a unifying force that leads us to look out for the needs of others in the community of Jesus.

In this passage, Paul continues his treatment of unity, which began in Philippians 1:27.

Philippians 2:1-4:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with 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 purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Basis for unity

Verse 1 contains four conditional clauses that each begin with the word “if,” but it’s clear that Paul believes each of these conditions has been met. He’s saying, “If these things are true (and they are!), make my joy complete ... ”

Paul probably has the Trinity in mind. He writes in 2 Corinthians 13:14: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” The similarities between that verse and Philippians 2:1 are striking enough to make us think that just as encouragement comes from Christ in the first clause and fellowship comes from the Spirit in the third clause, love comes from the Father in the second clause. (A literal translation of the second clause would not contain the pronoun “his.” It’s more likely a reference to the Father’s love rather than Christ’s love.) Each conditional clause appeals to something God has given us. Verse 1 comes to us, then, as exhortation to ponder these gifts of God.

The noun translated “encouragement” has a range of meaning, but, in light of Paul’s use of the verb elsewhere, here it probably means “exhortation” (Romans 12:1, 15:30, 16:17; 1 Corinthians 1:10, 4:16, 16:5). Although the words are Paul’s in Philippians 1:29, it is Christ who challenges us to appreciate suffering as a gift. The Father’s love for us comforts us when we suffer. The third clause would be literally translated “fellowship of the Spirit,” which means the fellowship created by the Spirit. Our fellowship is with God and each other. In light of the previous three clauses, it is likely that tenderness and compassion come from all three members of the Trinity (Romans 12:1, Philippians 1:8).

Have you found the exhortation you need from your relationship with Christ? Has he challenged you to live in a different way than you would otherwise? Where would you be if not for the challenge of Jesus? If you were not following him, what would you be following, and where would that path lead? Those of us who have come to know Christ have been — and continue to be — challenged by Christ.

When you have suffered, have you ever felt comfort from the Father's love? The simple fact that the Father loves us is comforting. Sometimes, it seems, that's all we have to hold onto: the belief that the Father loves us. That belief can sustain us through many a dark hour. Can you remember a dark hour, and can you remember when the light of the Father's love broke through?

Do you have a relationship with God, and have you been blessed by relationships in the family of God? That's the work of the Holy Spirit. He creates and nurtures relationships. We can never stop giving thanks that the Spirit has introduced us to God and continues to bring us closer to God. And how about the family of God? Has the Spirit united you with brothers and sisters in a way that ministers to your soul?

In these ways and in countless others, have you felt the tenderness and compassion of God? Isaiah says of the Lord, who would be seen in Jesus: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isaiah 40:11). That's a picture of the tenderness and compassion of God. God cradles you in his arms and carries you close to his heart. Have you ever felt him do that for you?

These are some of the gifts the Father, the Son and the Spirit have lavished on us. Perhaps we haven't consciously experienced all of them, but they are available. Because Paul's exhortation for us is based on our receipt of these gifts, it behooves us to acknowledge them, to ponder them and give thanks for them — and maybe, for a few moments, before we proceed, to experience them anew. Think about how Christ has challenged you. Focus your mind on the thought that the Father loves you, and feel the comfort that comes from his love. Think of the relationships that the Holy Spirit has created for you — first with God, then with brothers and sisters. Picture Jesus, the good shepherd, cradling you in his arms and carrying you next to his heart. Open your heart. Believe that God has gifted you in these ways.

If we appreciate that God has blessed us in these ways, we'll be ready to respond to Paul's exhortation in verses 2 through 4. The call is to unity, and the activity of the Trinity on our behalf is the perfect lead-in, for in the Godhead, we find the perfect example of community: Father, Son and Spirit — three in one.

Reason for unity

Paul has already told his readers that he joyfully prays that their love for each other would abound more and more (Philippians 1:4, 9). If they do what he says in verses 2 through 4, he expects his joy to be "complete." Because Paul has loved them so much, they should be motivated to make him joyful. This is an indication of Paul's heart for these people. He is so bound up in them that their well-being can bring him joy. The Apostle John says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4).

Having opened their eyes to four gifts that God has given them, Paul has four exhortations for them in verse 2. Literally, Paul tells them to make his joy complete by:

- thinking the same thing.
- having the same love.

- being united in soul.
- thinking the one.

The particulars may be difficult to interpret, but the thrust of the whole is clear enough. Paul is advocating unity.

The phrase “thinking the same thing,” or something very close to it, appears elsewhere in the writings of Paul, in Romans 12:16, 15:5; 2 Corinthians 13:11; and Philippians 4:2. In those instances, Paul is speaking of unity. The phrase “thinking the same thing” in verse 2 contains the only finite verb in the group. Paul defines what he means by this phrase with the following three phrases.

To have the same love is to have the kind of love for each other that God has for us. To be united in soul is to be connected with one another. “Thinking the one” is probably another way of saying “thinking the same thing.” But what is the “one”? What is the “thing”? The unifying force in this letter is the gospel. By appealing to unity in the previous section, Paul told his readers to conduct themselves in a manner “worthy of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27).

In the 1991 movie *City Slickers*, Curly, an old cowboy, advises an advertising executive, played by Billy Crystal, to find that “one thing” in life. Curly dies before elaborating, and Billy Crystal is left in the dark as to what his “one thing” might be.⁸ The scriptures say we should think the “one” and think the same “thing.” For those who follow Jesus, the one thing we’re looking for, the thing we pour our lives into and devote our lives to, is the gospel.

We must recognize what we’re uniting for. Sometimes we forget. If a community is to be united, it must have something worth uniting for. Most of us are looking for a cause and for a community, and the church offers us both in the same package. It is a community that comes together for the cause of the gospel. We are to keep the gospel truth that Jesus is Lord and the gospel mission to proclaim the lordship of Christ in the forefront of our thoughts. The gospel is the banner we rally behind. We must keep it front and center. The gifts of the gospel — exhortation from Christ, comfort from the love of the Father, fellowship from the Spirit — motivate us to line up behind the gospel.

Enemies of unity

The enemies of unity are selfish ambition and vain conceit. Paul earlier wrote that some of the preachers who took his place were proclaiming Christ “out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains” (Philippians 1:17). To be motivated by selfish ambition is to seek to advance ourselves rather than the gospel and to view others as rivals. When we adopt such a mindset, the community suffers.

The word translated “vain conceit” would be literally translated “empty glory.” The verb “empty” and the noun “glory” are both used in connection to Christ in the following verses, but in a completely different way. Christ “made himself nothing” — literally, “emptied” himself — and God exalted him so that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the “glory” of God the Father (Philippians 2:7, 11). Christ sought the glory of the Father, and in so doing, he was glorified.

Having been made in the image of God but damaged by sin, we are being transformed, through our relationship with Christ, so that we reflect his glory — so that we become like him (2 Corinthians 3:18). But when we seek our own glory, seeking to establish a reputation for ourselves, the results are meaningless and have no lasting value. And, more to the point of the passage, our efforts are divisive.

We may have within us a spirit of selfish ambition and vain conceit. If so, it’s a good desire gone wrong. To want to be glorified by God — to hear his “well done, good and faithful servant” — is a

good desire, and one that will be granted for those who know Jesus. Although we may sense within us selfish ambition and vain conceit, we don't have to act on them. Acknowledge them, yes. Confess them, yes. Act on them, no. It is possible to want to act in a way that lifts yourself up and puts another down and, at the same time, not to act on that desire. It is possible, for example, to keep your mouth shut. Some of us simply need to keep our mouths shut.

When I feel selfish ambition and vain conceit welling up within me, I remember passages such as this one, and I remember that the gospel of the kingdom is more important than whatever I think my place in it should be.

Ally of unity

The ally of unity is humility, which begins with a proper assessment of ourselves as creatures dependent on the Creator. Both James 4:10 and 1 Peter 5:6 tell us to humble ourselves before God. How can we exalt ourselves over another when we are dependent on Another for our very next breath? When we humble ourselves before God, we see that we are valuable in God's eyes, yes, but no more valuable than anyone else. All bear the divine image. Humility was viewed as a weakness in the Greco-Roman world, as it is in our world. In the kingdom of God, it's a virtue.

Such humility, then, enables us to do the seemingly impossible: consider others better than ourselves. This does not mean that others are more important you are. It does not mean that you don't consider your own needs. It means, as verse 4 indicates, that you consider others' needs more important than yours.

A literal reading of verse 4 would have Paul's readers "not looking out for the interests of themselves but also for the interests of others." The word "also" implies that we *are* looking out for our own interests, but the *command* is to look out for the interests of others. The biblical assumption is that we will look out for our own needs. The command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19) is not a command to love yourself. It is assumed that you do love yourself. We don't have to be told to look out for our interests. We naturally do so. We feed, clothe and shelter ourselves. What we don't naturally do is look out for the needs of others. God wants to change that. God will meet our needs (Philippians 4:19), and that liberates us to meet the needs of others.

The words "consider" and "looking out" imply application of the mind and intention of the will. Based on the biblical imperative, we conclude that others' needs are more important than our own, and we actively look out for their needs. The verb that would be literally translated "looking out" is related to the noun that was used of a military guard, spy or scout. We are to be like a guard, a spy or a scout, looking outward and asking God whose needs we should meet. Paul considered his life "necessary" for the Philippians' progress in the faith (Philippians 1:24-25). His "need" was to meet the needs of others. That is our need as well. We need to love others. Our needs actually get met when we meet the needs of another. And when we meet the needs of another, we meet the needs of the community. Nothing nurtures unity like humble, self-giving love that expresses itself in meeting the needs of others.

Anne Lamott in her book *Traveling Mercies* writes of the time she, as a single mother with a baby, began attending a church in the North Bay:

And then almost immediately they set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought me casseroles to keep in the freezer, they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be part of the family. And they began slipping me money.

Now, a number of older black women live pretty close to the bone financially on small Social Security checks. But routinely they sidled up to me and stuffed bills in my pocket — tens and twenties. It was always done so stealthily that you might have thought they were slipping me bindles of cocaine. One of the most consistent donors was a very old woman named Mary Williams, who is in her mid-eighties now, so beautiful with her crushed hats and hallelujahs; she always brought me plastic Baggies full of dimes, noosed with little wire twists.¹⁰

That's a church whose members look out for the interests of others.

How about your faith community? We could meet the needs of others by arriving early to our gatherings to see who we might greet. And how about looking around in a similar way after we finish? Let us look out for the needs of people who are new to our community or seem to be on the outskirts and make efforts to include them. How about during the week? Can you give someone a call, write someone a note, invite someone to a gathering — someone you've just met or someone you don't know very well? This doesn't seem natural. It requires active consideration and perception.

Some verses in scripture, even in this passage, are difficult to interpret. Verses 3 and 4 are not. We may wish they were difficult to interpret, but they are not. Our problem is that it is all too obvious what they say. Consider others better than yourselves. Look out for the interests of others. Can you imagine what would happen in a community whose members thought and lived this way? People say sometimes that they "feel the Spirit." If someone walked into a community that, in the manner of Philippians 2:3-4, loved each other and everyone who entered into its midst, he or she would be able to feel the love that the Spirit created. It would be palpable. And irresistible. And if a whole lot of people feel that kind of love, what would that mean for the advance of the gospel? We can only imagine.

I ask: Why not this community? Why not this church? Why not you?

The gospel advances

Understanding the gifts of the gospel — exhortation in Christ, the comfort of the Father, the fellowship of the Spirit — leads us to unify behind the gospel. If we understand God's love for us and keep the gospel front and center, selfish ambition and vain conceit are held in check, humility and love and community win the day — and the gospel advances.

Questions

1. Reflect on how God has challenged and comforted you and created relationships both with him and others.
2. How can you see your answers to Question 1 motivating unity for the sake of the gospel?
3. How have you seen selfish ambition or vain conceit challenge unity and damage the cause of the gospel?
4. How might you go about looking out for the interests of others?
5. What do you think would happen to the church that took Philippians 2:3-4 to heart?

The Descent of God

The word “journey” is popular these days. People talk of life as a journey. We’re all on a journey. It’s true. The imagery is biblical. The text before us today speaks of a journey. The person making this journey originates from a place no one else has come from. He goes to a place no one else has visited. He returns home as something more than he was when he left. This is the greatest journey, for it is the journey of God.

It is the kind of journey God wants us humans to take. God became human. As a human, he became an obedient servant, died for humanity and returned to heaven as the Sovereign (and now human) Lord. The first humans were to serve God and reign over his creation (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:15). After their failure, God gave Israel the same vocation. God’s design for Israel is most clearly seen in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12). Isaiah calls Israel the servant of the Lord (Isaiah 41:8; 44:1, 21). Israel was to serve God, suffer for humanity and rule wisely over God’s creation. Like the first humans, Israel failed, leaving all creation to wait for the true Servant of the Lord who would make the journey marked out by God for humanity and then empower others to do the same. The first humans were exiled from the garden. Israel was exiled from the Promised Land, which is spoken of as if it’s a garden. In the journey of Christ, God himself went into exile, leaving the garden of heaven, in order to return to heaven with us. It’s a story of exile and return. Philippians 2:5 says, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” The journey of God is given to us in Philippians 2:5-11 to inspire us to walk where he walked.

In this chapter, we’ll consider the first leg of God’s journey. In the next chapter, we’ll consider the second leg of his journey. Then we’ll consider the journey we’re called to make. The story defines God for us and allows us to see him for who he is. When we see him for who he is and when we understand the reason for his journey, we can’t help but let him into our hearts. Along the way, we’ll hear echoes from Isaiah’s Servant Songs and from John 13:1-20, the latter of which reports that Jesus donned the garb of a slave and washed his disciples’ feet.

Philippians 2:6-11 may be a poem. At the least, it’s poetic prose. Verses 6 through 8 convey descent. Verses 9 through 11 convey ascent. The poetic structure of the text matches the story it tells. It’s a story of descent and ascent. The bold numbers represent the verses, and the letters convey the structure:

A 6	11 A’
B 7	10 B’
C 8	9 C’

Philippians 2:5-11:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

How Christ thought about equality with God

Christ Jesus was “in very nature God” — or, more literally, he was “in the form of God.” This definition is further amplified by the words “equality with God.” He was God. The same word translated “very nature” is used of Christ’s becoming a servant. He became a servant, and he was God. In saying that he existed in the form of God, Paul is saying that Christ was equal with God and yet distinct. In that the word “form” is also used of his becoming human, to say that Christ existed in the form of God is also to say that he was a potential human.

Equality with God is something that Christ always possessed. The word translated “grasped” would be better translated “exploited.” He did not consider using his equality with God to his own advantage. The first humans grasped for equality with God (Genesis 3:5). So did Israel (Habakkuk 2:18). Quite simply, we humans want to be gods. Part of the human quest seems to be an attempt to gain status, power and privileges. Once we gain any measure of these, we hold onto them for dear life and grasp for more. Jesus said, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors” (Luke 22:25). History suggests that nothing has changed. The human tendency is to use one’s status, power and privileges to one’s own advantage. Think of the rights you have and how important they are to you. Think of the rights you’d like to have and how important they would be to you — the recognition you’d receive, the circles you’d travel in, the doors that would open to you.

Is God like the lords of the earth? Is God like us? The story of Christ Jesus says that God is different. For us humans, Christ defines God — or perhaps redefines him. His story defines what it means to be equal with God. It shows us who God really is and what he is really like. Christ had everything anyone could ever dream of — the status, power and privileges of God Almighty. Yet not for one second did he consider using his position to his own advantage. Being equal with God committed him to a different path.

Jesus embarks on a journey. He leaves heaven. He sets out for earth.

The first part of his journey takes him to the most vulnerable place on earth: the womb. He enters the world as a human embryo in the womb of a woman, whose pregnancy at first causes her fiancé to conclude that she’s been fooling around. She’s a Jewish woman in a Roman world, the decree of which compels her to make the arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The place of Christ’s birth is a manger for animals, not an inn for humans. He’s born into the land of a wicked tyrant, King Herod, who is so intent on destroying him that he slays all the boys in Bethlehem who are less than 2 years old. A more vulnerable entry into the world could hardly be imagined.

What Christ did as God: He became a slave

What did Christ do as God? He made himself nothing. Literally, he “emptied himself.” This is a metaphor, similar to the one Paul uses of himself later in this letter, when he says that he may be “poured out like a drink offering” on behalf of his readers (Philippians 2:17). To empty oneself is to give one’s all. We might say that someone “poured herself” into a cause. Christ did not empty himself *of* anything. He did not cease being God. He emptied “himself.” He poured out himself. He “poured out his life unto death” (Isaiah 53:12).

How did he empty himself? By “taking the very nature of a servant” — literally, by taking the “form” of a servant. Just as he existed in the form of God, he took the form of a servant. Just as he was God, he became a servant. This is further qualified as his “being made in human likeness.” This is not to say that he only looked like a human. It means that he was human. The word “likeness” implies that

he was also more than human. Paul says elsewhere that Christ came in the “likeness” of sinful man — meaning that he was fully human, but without sin (Romans 8:3). The Apostle John writes that Christ “was God” and “became flesh” (John 1:1, 14). Paul says that “in Christ all the fulness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). He also says that all things were created by Christ, which is another way of equating him with God (Colossians 2:16).

The human form that God took was that of a servant. The title Christ was attached to his name because his apostles recognized him to be the Messiah, the Jewish and human king. Yet God did not come into the world as a king. He came as a servant — as a slave. A slave has no status, no power, no privileges. God has everything; a slave has nothing. Christ came as one who had everything but used nothing.

His master was God the Father, and he was “obedient” to him (verse 8). Christ was *the* Servant of the Lord, portrayed centuries before his appearance by Isaiah’s Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew 12:18-19). As the Father’s obedient servant, Christ came to serve humanity. Creation is the Father’s palace (Isaiah 66:1). We are the Father’s guests. Christ serves his Master’s guests.

We love stories of people rising from humble circumstances. The clerk becomes CEO. The understudy becomes a star. The immigrant strikes it rich. Here’s a story of descent from omnipotence to obscurity, from stardom to servanthood, from riches to rags. Who wants to make a journey like that?

This part of Christ’s journey takes him to the floor — quite literally. John tells the story in John 13:1-5:

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Jesus, knowing who he was and what he could do, and knowing that betrayal was in the air, does not use his power to stop Judas. Instead, he performs the most demeaning task of a slave. He washes the feet of his disciples, even Judas, whose feet will take him this very night from this place to the Jewish leaders bent on destroying Jesus. By serving his disciples in this outlandish way, he’s extending them a warm and emphatic greeting of love and acceptance.

What Christ did as a human: He obeyed

After becoming human, Christ was “found in appearance as a man.” This doesn’t mean that he only appeared to be a man; it means that he was seen to be a man. Verses 6 and 7 explain what Christ did as God. Verse 8 explains what he did as a human. As verses 6 and 7 explain what it means to be God, verse 9 explains what it means to be human.

Christ humbled himself before God and others. He sublimated his will to the will of God. He took the lowest place, not the highest place. In that he was obedient “to death,” he was completely obedient and he was obedient to God’s final command, which led to his death. “The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat

me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting” (Isaiah 50:5-6).

Christ’s obedience extended to “death on a cross.” Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution reserved for non-citizens, either slaves or free persons of the lowest standing. Particularly, revolutionaries were often crucified. A person who was crucified was hardly considered human. And by the time the nails and wood had finished their job, the criminal would hardly even appear human. In heaven, Christ existed in the form of God. On earth, he took the form of a slave. On the cross, he became deformed — a twisted lump of mangled flesh. “His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (Isaiah 52:14).

Adam was called to serve God, but he rebelled against God and grasped for equality with God. Israel, also called to serve God, was called by God to undo the sin of Adam and extend God’s blessing to the world, but it also rebelled. Christ succeeded where Adam and Israel failed. He served God. He undid the sin of Adam and Israel by dying the death of Adam and Israel. Adam and Israel failed to serve God and rebelled against him, and Christ died the death of a slave and the death of a rebel. He died on a cross, where slaves and rebels die.

This is ultimately how, as the obedient Servant of the Lord, he served humanity. This is how he served us. For his death was not only Adam’s and Israel’s, it was ours as well. We too have rebelled against our call to serve God. “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6). His death on the cross in our place brought us peace with God.

Obedience isn’t prized around here. We exalt the assertive, independent, self-made man or woman who answers to no one. Be your own man. Be your own woman. Obedience appeals to nothing in our culture, particularly obedience to God. And if such obedience is to expose you to pain, shame and death, and even execution that mangles your body, who needs it?

This part of the journey takes Christ to a garden. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he told his disciples in Gethsemane. He left them in order to pray. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Three times he prayed this prayer (Mark 14:32-41). Luke says that he was “in anguish” and that “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44). He was “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3). By the time he got up for the third time, the answer from the Father had arrived with the mob sent by the Jewish leaders. The cup would not be taken from him. Strengthened by prayer, Jesus rose in obedience to God. He became obedient to death — even death on a cross.

Shattered images

Conventional notions of God often group around one of two images. The first is the image of a power-hungry tyrant. After all, that’s what the lords of the earth are like. The second is that of a remote, uncaring landlord. The lords of the earth seem to be like that, also. Do you entertain either or both of those images of God? You may answer no with your head, but the way you live may be saying something else. This story says that God is neither a power-hungry tyrant nor a remote, uncaring landlord. It shatters both images. It redefines power as vulnerability and brings God near.

Why would God make such a journey? You know the answer. He did it for you:

■ Isaiah 59:16: “He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.”

■ Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

■ 2 Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

The Creator allows himself to be created. The Playwright writes for himself an impossible part and enters the story. The king “clothes himself as a beggar and renounces his throne” in order to win the hand of his beloved.¹⁰

God doesn’t just become human; he becomes a slave. He doesn’t just die; he dies on a cross. He goes to the womb, to the floor and to the garden for you. He becomes as vulnerable as a human embryo for you. He gets on his hands and knees to let you know you’re his special guest. He prays in agony to find the Father’s will for you. And finally, he pours himself into serving you by pouring himself out on the cross. He pours himself out to the last drop of blood.

Mozart’s *Requiem* contains this line: “Remember, merciful Jesu, that I am the cause of your journey.” After all he endured for us, could he ever forget?

Let this story, this poem, this journey, this God, into your heart.

Questions

1. Consider the usual human posture toward status, rights and privileges and the fact that Christ did not use any of these to his own advantage. How does this influence you?

2. Consider that Christ, who was equal with God, became a vulnerable human embryo for you. How does this influence you?

3. Picture Jesus getting on his hands and knees as a slave to serve you and treat you as his special guest. What thoughts run through your mind?

4. Picture Jesus praying in agony to find the Father’s will for you. What thoughts run through your mind?

5. Consider that Jesus poured himself out for you on the cross. How does this influence you?

The Exaltation of Christ

I remember my first encounter with Philippians 2:5-11 because of my strong reaction to it. I was a teen-ager, I had just come to Christ and I started to read the Bible. I was calm and steady in verses 5 through 8, which speak of the incarnation of Christ. Reading the passage for the first time, I was unprepared for what came next. I came to verses 9, 10 and 11, and something happened inside me. I felt something like tingles up and down my spine, and I lost my breath for a moment. Thus was my first exposure to the exaltation of Christ. I did not understand the theology, but I did understand that if Christ was exalted to the highest place, that if every knee would bow to him and that every tongue would confess that he is Lord, I was reading about someone whose greatness exceeded anything I thought possible. Let us approach this text today as if we were all teen-agers reading it for the first time, and let us marvel at the greatness of Christ.

Philippians 2:6-11 depicts the journey of God. Verses 6 through 8 describe his journey from heaven to earth in the person of Christ Jesus. Verses 9 through 11, the section that concerns us in this study, describe his journey from earth to heaven. When he returns to heaven, he returns as both God and man, and he assumes his throne.

God intended humanity, first Adam and then Israel, to reign over creation. Adam failed. Israel also failed and was mostly humiliated before the nations and finally went into exile in Babylon. But its scriptures, particularly Isaiah 40-55, held out hope that it would one day be vindicated as the people of God and be exalted over the nations. Israel was exiled, but it hoped it would return from exile. In leaving heaven, Christ lives the Israel story. He goes into exile for Israel and he returns to heaven. In being exalted by God, Christ fulfills the role designed by God for Adam and Israel — and for humanity: to reign wisely over creation.

The story of the descent of Christ invites us to let him into our hearts. The story of his ascent compels us to worship him. Just as we did in tracking with the first leg of Christ's journey, we will hear echoes from Isaiah's Servant Songs, particularly Isaiah 50:4-11, and from John 13:1-20, where Jesus assumes the role of a slave.

Here, once again, is the poetic structure of the text:

A 6	11 A'
B 7	10 B'
C 8	9 C'

Philippians 2:5-11:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God exalts Christ, shares his name

Verse 9 begins with the word “therefore,” indicating that the reason for God’s exaltation of Christ is contained in verses 6 through 8. Because of the journey Christ took, God exalted him. Because Christ humbled himself as an obedient servant, God exalted him. God exalted him by raising from the dead and enthroning him in heaven.

God exalted him in a particular way: He exalted him to the highest place. It is true that God exalts those who humble themselves before him, but he only exalts Christ to the highest place. Why is this? In verse 6 we saw that Christ was God. Verses 10 and 11, again, depict Christ as equal with God, although he is now also human. The highest place is reserved for God himself. The verb translated “exalted to the highest place” is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament of God himself (Psalm 97:9). Verses 7 and 8 explain what equality with God meant for Christ. It meant obedience unto death — even death on a cross. Only God can do this in this way and have it mean what it meant. It can be said, therefore, that because Christ did what only God can do, God exalted him to the highest place. Christ humbled himself to the lowest possible degree, and God exalted him to the highest possible degree. God shares his throne with Christ.

God’s intention for us humans was to reign as kings of creation. Adam and Eve were to reign over creation, as was Israel (Genesis 1:26-28, Exodus 19:6). Particularly, the Jewish (and human) Messiah was expected to reign on the throne of David, his predecessor. Christ is the truly human one, the true Israelite, the true king. Israel, as the people of God, expected to be vindicated by God and exalted over her enemies (Isaiah 45:14-17). Christ, the obedient Israelite, is vindicated and exalted, and now reigns in heaven from the throne of David (Acts 2:22-36). He reigns as God, and he reigns as man. The Lord speaks of Christ in Isaiah’s final Servant Song: “See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (Isaiah 52:13).

Thus Christ returns to the place he came from: heaven. But he returns as something more than when he left. He returns as a human. He is still God, but now he is also human.

In addition to exalting Christ, God “gave him the name that is above every name.” What name is that? The name Jesus had already been given to him. The name most likely in view here is “Lord” (verse 11). The word translated “Lord” (*kurios*) was used of Yahweh, the God of Israel, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. God gave Jesus the very name of God: Yahweh (in Hebrew) and Lord (in Greek). It makes sense. Verses 6 through 10 demonstrate that Christ did what only God can do. He demonstrated what it means to be God. God then responds by sharing his name with Christ so that all the world will know who God is and what he is like. This human, Christ Jesus, is given the very name of God.

Jesus’ actions, as recorded in John 13:1-20, serve as an illustration of his incarnation and exaltation. During his last meal with his disciples, he got up from the table and removed his outer clothing. In the incarnation, Christ got up from his heavenly throne and removed his outer garments of glory, so to speak. After getting up from the table, he wrapped a towel around his waist, as a slave, and washed his disciples’ feet. This was an outlandish, even humiliating, demonstration of his love and acceptance of his disciples. He took on the “very nature of a servant,” as Paul says in Philippians 2:6. John adds, “When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.” After he had finished his task as the Servant of the Lord by being obedient to death, he put on his outer garments of glory, so to speak, and returned to his former place, heaven.

Every knee bows, every tongue confesses

In verses 10 and 11, Paul picks up strands from Isaiah 45:23, where the Lord says, “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.” The words spoken of the Lord in Isaiah are spoken of Christ in Philippians. Isaiah 45:14-25 is a fiercely monotheistic text: “Surely God is with you, and there is no other; there is no other God” (verse 14). “I am the Lord, and there is no other” (verse 18). “And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me” (verse 21). “For I am God, and there is no other” (verse 22). There is no other, but there is Christ Jesus. Paul, a Jew whose monotheism runs as deep as Isaiah 45, concludes that Christ Jesus is Yahweh in the flesh.

To bow one’s knee meant to recognize and acknowledge one in authority. Jesus will be acknowledged as the ultimate authority: God. The acknowledgment will be comprehensive: Every knee will bow. To illustrate total submission, Paul says that the knees of beings “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” will bow. This was a conventional expression to convey universality (Revelation 5:3, 13-14). The heavenly beings are probably angels, both good and wicked, whose domain is the heavenly, unseen world (Ephesians 6:12). Earthly beings would be living humans, and those under the earth are probably dead humans (Romans 14:9).

Actions will not only indicate the sovereignty of Christ but words will as well. Every tongue belonging to the beings spoken of in verse 10 will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is Yahweh, that he is the one true God. Caesar, the Roman king, claimed that he was lord (Acts 25:26). For Romans, the title didn’t always imply deity. It meant authority, power and sovereignty.

The Roman kings crushed all who opposed their authority. Say too much or gather too much of a following, and Rome would give you a demonstration of its authority by putting you on one of its crosses. To Rome, Jesus was a little nuisance, another would-be Jewish messiah to be crushed like an ant under its boot. Now Paul is circulating the proposition that this Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, and he is doing so in Philippi, a Roman colony. It’s a preposterous suggestion, really. Caesar will one day bow to Jesus, and should be bowing even now? That’s what Paul is saying. He can say this, and have some people believe it, because Rome couldn’t keep Jesus in the tomb. And along comes Paul to tell everyone what the resurrection means: It means that God has exalted Jesus to the highest place, and it means that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This preposterous and subversive claim worked its way into the fabric of Rome until one of its own kings, Constantine, in 313, some 250 years later, confessed that Jesus is Lord and bowed to him.

When every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord, God the Father will be glorified. God will be glorified because when everyone acknowledges that Jesus is Lord, everyone will see what God is like. Everyone will know how much God, as Father, loves his children.

Every knee “should” bow and every tongue “should” confess. God exalted Christ with the intention that every knee bow and every tongue confess. Some of us are bowing and confessing willingly and joyfully. It cannot be said, however, that every knee is now bowing and every tongue is now confessing. When Christ returns, everyone will acknowledge his lordship, willingly or unwillingly. Verses 10 and 11, then, imply that there will be yet another leg to Christ Jesus’ journey, yet another trip from heaven to earth — this time as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The lords of the earth exalt themselves, make a name for themselves, and force people to bow to them and confess the greatness of their name. The same tendency is within us. Early in the history of humanity, people settled in Shinar. They said to each other, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). Humans have been exalting themselves and trying to make

a name for themselves ever since. Why? Because we don't trust God and we're therefore dreadfully insecure. Satan offered Christ exaltation with ease: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me'" (Matthew 4:8-9). Christ refused. Instead, he obeyed God and committed himself to a path that led to the humiliation of a cross rather than exaltation of a throne and to being called names such as "deceiver" rather than Lord (Matthew 27:63). Although the call to be Lord of the earth was deep in the bones of Christ, he became a servant, humbled himself and became obedient to God, allowing God to take care of his position and his name.

John is given a vision of Christ Jesus on his heavenly throne in Revelation 5:11-13:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

Vindication and exaltation of Israel

The voice of Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, can be heard in Isaiah 50:4-9. Listen to the voice of humility, servanthood and obedience, and listen for the expectation of vindication and exaltation:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.

Jesus no doubt had passages such as this one and Daniel 7:9-14 in mind when the Sanhedrin put him on trial. Daniel had a dream in which he saw "one like a son of man," probably the representative of Israel, "coming with the clouds of heaven" into the courtroom of the Ancient of Days, who proceeds to vindicate him, exalt him and grant him a universal and everlasting kingdom. Jesus told his accusers, "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). He was unconcerned about the verdict in the earthly courtroom because he knew he would be vindicated in the heavenly courtroom.

Israel's scriptures led it to believe that God would vindicate and exalt it and that the nations would be subservient to it. When that happened, the nations would be judged. But Israel tended to miss the part that when that happened the nations would at the same time be blessed. Jesus, as Israel's representative, takes on its role. Now that he has been exalted by God, those who submit to his reign are blessed. Those who don't are judged.

Worship and proclamation

What does God's exaltation of Christ mean for us? It means two things: worship and proclamation. We worship Jesus as Lord and we proclaim him Lord.

Everyone is going to bow one day anyway. We may as well get on with it, and we may as well bow willingly and joyfully now instead of begrudgingly and bitterly later. God exalted Christ. We should as well. We place him on the throne of our lives and on the throne of our church. We behold his majesty. We get a Revelation 5 vision of Christ. With our imaginations, we hear the voices of thousands upon thousands of angels singing: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” We hear every creature singing, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!” Then we join the angels and the creatures, and we sing their songs and others like them.

Worship inspires us and equips us to then go forth and proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord. God’s proclamation that Jesus is Lord represents a challenge to all would-be Caesars, not to mention all the other pagan gods and goddesses. That proclamation has been entrusted to those of us who follow Jesus.

We “go into all the world and proclaim, like messengers announcing the enthronement of a new emperor, that Jesus of Nazareth is now exalted” as Lord of the whole creation and that those who submit to his reign will be set free from enslavement to the gods and goddesses of our world, the idols and the powers and the ideas that people seemingly can’t live without.¹¹ We tell the story of Jesus to anyone who will listen. We tell them that God has won a great victory over the forces of evil. We tell them that the reign of Christ means the tyrants’ time is up. We tell them that the long exile of humanity is over and that God is waiting for them with open arms. We tell them that there’s a new and better way of being human. We tell them that if they follow Jesus, they too will be resurrected, and will reign with him in the new heavens and the new earth.

The world needs this proclamation and is worth this proclamation. And when you go out into the world, don’t be intimidated by the powers of the world. Not one of them is Lord. No, not one.

“Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together” (Psalm 34:3).

Questions

1. What do you learn about God from the story of Jesus in Philippians 2:5-11?
2. What notions about God does this passage contradict?
3. How do you react to the claim that every knee will bow to Christ?
4. How might you go about exalting Christ?
5. How might you go about proclaiming the lordship of Christ?

The Road to Glory

We've spent two chapters considering the journey of God as seen in the incarnation and exaltation of Christ. Now it's time for us to make a journey. For the journey of Christ is the journey that was marked out for humanity long ago. It's the journey marked out for Adam and Eve and for Israel and, finally, for you and me. The journey of God, then, becomes your journey. It is the greatest journey you can make.

The first leg of Christ's journey, culminating in his crucifixion, inspires us to let him into our hearts. The second leg, his exaltation to the highest place, compels us to worship him. Now we must follow him. We must walk where he walked. To do so, we must continue connecting with him by opening our hearts to him and worshiping him and by marveling at his example. Also, we don't walk the path alone. Christ himself, through his Holy Spirit, gives us strength and guidance.

Paul inserts the story of Christ at this point in his letter to the Philippians so that we might follow the example of Christ. The grammatical links in the context of Philippians 2 are the words "humility" in verse 2 and "obeyed" in verse 12. We are to humble ourselves before God and others in the family of God and obey God just as Christ "humbled" himself and became "obedient" (verse 4).

Our journey, then, will follow the path of Christ on the road to glory. In a metaphorical sense, we'll go to the womb in vulnerability, to the floor as servants, to the garden in prayer, to the cross to forgive and to the throne in exaltation. This is the journey that conforms us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

Philippians 2:5-11:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul speaks of the attitude, or mindset, that Christ exemplifies: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." He's advocating humility that expresses itself in active love for others. Such humility creates and maintains unity so that the gospel may advance (Philippians 1:27-2:4). This is the kind of mindset that Paul wants to see, literally, "in yourselves" — in the church. One of the ways to cultivate such a mindset is to observe the life of Christ.

The womb

It's not that Christ grasped for equality with God. He was in very nature God, but he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. This was his mindset that led to his remarkable actions. Instead of exploiting his position as God, he became human. In becoming human, he defines what it means to be God. He also defines what it means to be human. His definition offers

a critique of competing definitions, most of which posit different ways to get and use status, power and privileges.

The first place Christ visited in his human journey was the womb of a woman. His entry into the world as a human embryo set the course for the vulnerability he exhibited throughout his journey in the world. He lived in dependence on God.

We all started out in the same place, of course. Each of us entered the world as a vulnerable human embryo, completely dependent on God. Will we let our entry into the world set the course for our journey in the world? When we make Christ our Lord, we acknowledge our dependence on God, in a sense, by entering the womb to be born again (John 3). In another sense, God at times takes us to the womb to show us that we are vulnerable creatures, not the Creator. Our health fails. A friend abandons us. Our dreams crash into reality. Jetliners crash into towers of strength. I have a friend who finally acknowledged God when she was giving birth and things didn't go so well. She came to the conclusion, "I'm not in control." God took her to the womb, so to speak, when she lost control of her own womb.

Why would God take us to the womb? To give birth to something new. From the standpoint of the letter to the Philippians, he takes us to the womb, showing us our vulnerability, that we might acknowledge our dependence on him and assume a different posture toward status, power and privileges. They are not to be used to our own advantage. This is the mindset we must adopt and cultivate if we are to act like Jesus.

In the movie *Braveheart*, William Wallace, a commoner, confronts the nobles of Scotland with these words: "You think your titles exist to provide you with land. I say it exists to provide the people freedom. I go to get it for them."¹² We must assume that whatever status, power and privileges come our way must be used to bless others and, if need be, relinquished in order to bless others.

The floor

Christ "made himself nothing" (literally, "emptied himself") by becoming a human and specifically by becoming a human slave who served God, his Master, by serving humanity. The Apostle John illustrates this in John 13:1-5, where Jesus removes his outer garments, wraps a towel around himself as a slave, gets down on his hands and knees, and washes the feet of his disciples. When a slave washed the feet of a visitor, the master of the house was saying, "Welcome to my home. You are my honored guest. Make yourself at home." When Jesus, the Master of Creation, washes the feet of his disciples, it's an outlandish expression of his acceptance of them.

Jesus not only exemplified servanthood, he taught it: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). After washing his disciples' feet, he tells them, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14-15).

The American dream is to rise to a position of status, power and privilege. The story of Christ beckons us to empty ourselves, to pour ourselves out, to become servants with no rights. The lowest task of a servant, which Jesus turned into the greatest task, is washing feet. For us, that means we greet and accept and honor one another and everyone who enters our midst regardless of their faults. Most people are afraid of rejection, but we accept them as our special guests so that they can see that they

are the Master's special guests. Greeting, accepting and honoring someone — faults and all — in the name of Christ can change his or her entire outlook on life.

Kathleen Norris writes of a monk in his mid-70s who had this assessment of himself: "I am tolerant, compassionate, and bossy — probably the result of having been lucky all my life. I have, since childhood, always felt the strong support of family and friends — so strong that it has prevented my dwelling on my numerous shortcomings because it's shown me that my shortcomings are acceptable to those I care about."¹³ When we greet, accept and honor someone, we show him that his shortcomings are not only acceptable to us but to our Master as well. We take off the outer garments of expectation, we put on the towel of servanthood and we keep an eye out for whose feet we can wash.

The garden

Christ humbled himself before God and others, taking the lowest place, not the highest place, and he became fully obedient to God, culminating in his death on the cross. Lest we get the impression that this was effortless obedience, the gospels show us Jesus in agony in the garden of Gethsemane, where he seeks the will of the Father but asks him for a path away from the cross.

If we find Jesus in the garden, and if we aspire to be the Master's humble and obedient servants who wash the feet of others, we must go to the garden as well. The garden is the place where the hard choices are made. It is the place where we do battle with our urges to follow a path other than that of the servant. It is the place where we present all our messy motives to God. It is the place where we wrestle with his strange purposes and wonder whether there is another way. It is the place where God receives from us our prayers and in return gives to us the strength to follow Jesus. It is the place where God transforms us from masters of our fate to servants of the Lord.

All things considered, the garden may be a place we'd prefer to avoid. Judas left before Jesus entered the garden. The rest of the disciples, troubled by the turn of events, fell asleep in the garden. We must go to the garden and do what Jesus instructed his disciples to do there: watch and pray.

For an annual personal retreat a few years ago, I decided to meditate and pray through this passage. As I reflected on the story of Christ, the Holy Spirit took me to the garden, where I had to confront my own attachment to status, power and privileges. Of all the personal retreats I've taken, this one was the most difficult. I didn't sense comfort coming from God's presence, as I have on other retreats. Instead, I felt urges and motives that troubled me. I trust that whatever happened there was a good a necessary part of the journey. Every so often, we must go to the garden to do business with God.

The cross

Strengthened by prayer and in obedience to the Father, Christ goes to the cross, where he suffered for the sin and sorrow of the world. He was broken that the world might be blessed.

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). As followers of Jesus, we must go where he went: to the cross. The cross is the place where sin and sorrow gather. It is the place where we hear and see and feel the pain of others, even the pain of the world. It is the the place where our hearts break for a broken world. It is the place where we mourn and weep and intercede for others, often with groanings too deep for words. It is the place where we enter the sin and sorrow of others, come alongside them and suffer with them. We embody the love Christ demonstrated on the cross. We become the hands and feet of his suffering love.

The cross is the place from which Jesus looked down upon his accusers and said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Most significantly, the cross is the place from which we offer forgiveness to those who have wounded us.

Listen to the words of Martin Luther King, who took the example of Christ to heart:

To our most bitter opponents we say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. ... Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

Love is the most durable power in the world. This creative force, so beautifully exemplified in the life of our Christ, is the most potent instrument available in mankind’s quest for peace and security. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military genius, looking back over his years of conquest, is reported to have said: “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have built great empires. But upon what did they depend? They depended on force. But centuries ago Jesus started an empire that was built on love, and even to this day millions will die for him.” Who can doubt the veracity of these words. The great military leaders of the past have gone, and their empires have crumbled and burned to ashes, but the empire of Jesus, built solidly and majestically on the foundation of love, is still growing.

We are a community of broken, wounded people who have found something for our pain in the love of Jesus and then seek to apply the medicine of his love to the wounds of others. The greatest medicine we can apply is forgiveness.

The throne

Because of the journey Christ took from heaven to earth, God exalted him by raising from the dead and enthroning him in heaven. God will do the same for those of us who follow Jesus. God shares his throne with Christ, and Christ will share his throne with us. In the new heavens and the new earth, those who humbled themselves before God and followed Jesus in this world will finally assume the position God intended for humanity. We will reign over creation. We’ll be sons of God, the lords of creation. In some sense, it’s already true. God has seated us with Christ in heaven (Ephesians 2:6), and he calls us sons of God (John 1:12). When God establishes his eternal kingdom on earth, the full implications of our position and name will be realized. “And they will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 22:5). This part of the human journey takes us to a throne, where the journey begins in the new heavens and the new earth.

Don’t worry about your position. Don’t worry about your name. Apply yourself to knowing and following Jesus. There is stored up for you treasure in heaven that isn’t worthy to be compared to the pebbles of status, position and power we’re inclined to store up for ourselves here. In due time, God will take care of your position and your name. In God’s courtroom, you’ll be vindicated and exalted.

When that happens, it will be “to the glory of God the Father.” When all creation sees you blessing it by ruling wisely over it along with the other followers of Jesus, it will see what God is really like. It will see what the Father has done for his precious child. It will see the Father’s child basking in the

glow of his love. It will see his child doing exactly what he or she is supposed to do. To God be the glory.

The image of Christ

This is the journey that shapes our lives, that conforms us to the image of Christ. The shape of our lives becomes “cruciform.” We are conformed to the image of Christ that we might be a blessing to others. We were made for this, and when the creature fulfills the Creator’s design, the creature is satisfied. The hard road is the beautiful road.

It’s easy to see how such a journey would create and preserve unity in the church and thereby advance the gospel. If one does not use one’s status, power and privileges to one’s own advantage and instead yields to the needs of others, the community of Jesus can’t help but be strengthened. In the process, we make God real to the world and we show the world what he is really like.

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (2 Peter 5:6).

It’s messy, but you enter the mess. You enter the mess of a life. You enter the mess in your fellowship. You enter the mess in your church. You enter the mess in your world. And you bring with you the healing, forgiving, reconciling love of Jesus. You may get pierced and crushed and wounded, but you’re in good company. Isaiah writes of Jesus: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). We make the wounds of Jesus effective for healing in the spheres we enter when we too risk being wounded by love.

Many of us are afraid we don’t have it in us. We’re afraid that we don’t love very much. Let me assure you: If you have given your life to Christ, he lives within you. You have it in you because you have Christ in you. There is a powerful love resident within you that is aching to get out. You may just need to give yourself a chance. You may need to give Jesus a chance.

Some may protest, “But you don’t understand. I’m a clutz. I don’t know how to love. All I ever do is make a mess. How can I enter the mess?”

There’s a great scene in the movie *A River Runs Through It*. Norman and his brother Paul take a very troubled man fishing as part of Norman’s effort to befriend him. In reality, Paul is just as troubled, but in a different way. Norman feels frustrated in his efforts to help the man. The subplot is that Norman has spent many years trying to steer his brother in a better direction and been equally frustrated. Norman, in exasperation, complains to Paul, “How do you help someone like that?” In a rare moment of vulnerability, Paul says, “Well, maybe he likes someone trying to help him.” It’s Paul’s way of thanking his big brother for trying to help him.¹⁴

We all stumble and bumble our way through and wonder how in even God’s name can we ever be effective. It isn’t often clear what we should do and how we should do it. So what? Do you think it was a smooth and artful stroll for Jesus from the Praetorium, along the Via Dolorosa, up to Calvary? Perhaps someone you know, perhaps your fellowship, perhaps your church, perhaps your world would like it if you tried to help. Give love a chance. It — you! — will make a difference.

Questions

1. How have you become aware of your vulnerability and dependence on God?
2. How might we go about greeting honoring and accepting those who enter our midst?

3. How have you found yourself wrestling with the strange purposes of God?
4. How might you go about being the “hands and feet” of Jesus’ suffering love?
5. If there is stored up for you treasure in heaven that is not worthy to be compared to the pebbles of status, power and privilege we accumulate for ourselves here, how might you go about living here?

Learning to be God's Community

Scholar Bruce Waltke says this:

I am a member of a church where I submit to women leaders, whom I trust and respect, because, even though I disagree with the practice, I am called upon to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit until we come to the full knowledge of Christ (Ephesians 4:1-13). It is wrong to divide the body of Christ, which confesses Jesus as Lord and believes in its heart that God raised him from the dead, on such non-moral and non-essential issues for the unity of the church as modes of baptism, eschatology, forms of government, and belief in the continuation or cessation of gifts.”¹⁵

The heart expressed in these words is committed to the community of God and to working things out within it rather than sniping at or running from it. This is the kind of heart the Apostle Paul is looking for in Philippians 2:12-13. In these verses, we are called to be God’s community by learning to live together, serve one another and love one another despite our differences.

In Philippians 2:12-18, Paul applies the story of Christ, which he presented in poetic fashion in verses 5 through 11, to life in the Philippian church. Paul wants his readers to respond to the story of Christ, so he begins verse 12 with the word “therefore.” The preceding story illustrated obedience (verse 8); now he wants the Philippians to be obedient, just as they have always “obeyed” (verse 12).

Throughout verses 12 to 18, much of Paul’s phraseology is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the story of the exodus. Even the story of Christ, the way Paul tells it, contains allusions to the exodus. Christ’s exodus from the grave, so to speak, resulted in his enthronement (verse 9), just as the exodus from Egypt resulted in God’s enthronement in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35). The church, having been freed from sin, is now the wilderness people of God.

Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Work out your salvation

Paul addresses his readers tenderly, as “my dear friends,” or, more literally, “my beloved” — loved by him and loved by God. He grounds his appeal to obedience in affection. He speaks from his heart — and from God’s heart — to their heart.

This is the same kind of approach the Lord himself took when giving the 10 commandments — literally, the 10 “words” — to Israel. Before giving his people the commandments, the Lord said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:10). The Lord reminded the people of his loving care for them as expressed in the exodus. In so many words, he was telling them, “Therefore, my beloved ...” The commandments, and the entire law, were given to Israel as a great gift that expressed the Lord’s best hopes for his people. The law was a love letter. God’s appeal to obedience, and his appeal to obedience through the apostle in this passage, is based on his loving care for us as expressed in the new exodus. God, through Christ’s death as the Passover Lamb,

rescued us from slavery to sin and death. God is saying to us, “I love you. Here’s how to respond to my love. And if you respond, you’ll be blessed.”

Paul’s appeal to the Philippians is also based on their history of obedience. He wants them to obey “as you have always obeyed.” Their obedience began with their acceptance of the gospel when Paul first visited Philippi (Acts 16:14, 31-34) and has continued to this point (Philippians 1:5).

Their obedience has remained steadfast whether Paul has been with them or far from them. He wants them to see his current absence as even greater incentive for obedience. Obedience is easier when the one calling for obedience is present; it is more difficult when that person is absent. Yet Paul wants them to demonstrate that their obedience is sincere and not dependent on his presence. Thus he hopes his absence will inspire them all the more. In this respect, he expects them to be different from the nation of Israel after the exodus. When Moses was absent, the people became disobedient (Exodus 32:1-10). Paul sees himself in the role of Moses, presenting the commandments of God and as being at times present with the Philippians and at times absent.

Paul has just proclaimed that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10-11). Obedience does not simply entail following rules. Obedience means coming under the lordship of Christ and following him. One who sees obedience as a set of rules rather than a Lord to love and follow will find himself on a well-worn path that leads to spiritual deadness. Jesus is our Lord. He loves us. We love him. If he tells us to do something, we do it because he loves us and because we love him. He speaks from his heart to our hearts. The story of Christ, in which he demonstrates his love for us, is both the inspiration and the pattern for our own obedience.

Paul defines the obedience he’s looking for in this case. He wants his readers to “work out your salvation.” Paul is writing to people whom he believes are saved. He’s not appealing to them to somehow, either by works or faith, get saved. He has already equated obedience with working out their salvation. This is what saved people do: They obey God; they work out their salvation. In so many words, Paul is saying: “God has saved you. Now get on with it.” But what, specifically, does Paul have in mind? His concern throughout Philippians 1:27-2:18 is unity in the church for the sake of the gospel. He further expands on this theme in verse 14, where he tells his readers to “do everything without complaining or arguing.” God has saved people in Philippi and created his community within the city. Now these people have to work out this salvation. They have to learn to be a community: to live together, to serve one another, to love one another.

They must do so “with fear and trembling.” Inasmuch as Paul in the next verse speaks of the presence of God, the phrase in verse 12 is most likely used to communicate the human response to God’s presence. The Philippians are to work out their common life before God. Paul may be absent, but God is present. The proper response when one is in the presence of God is “fear and trembling,” which means a posture of holy respect and reverence and awe and wonder.

Why would Paul invoke this phrase at this point, when he is speaking about community life? Because the most awesome and holy thing that this awesome and holy God does is create a people through whom he displays his glory to all creation (Isaiah 49:3, Ephesians 3:10). To create a worldwide people through whom he displays his glory, he creates communities of his people all over the world. When God creates one of these communities, it’s an awesome thing. Although God dwells in individual believers, the greater biblical truth even in the new covenant is that God dwells among the community of believers (1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-22).

Paul bases his appeal to obedience on the love of God, but he also includes the fear of God. This love is coming from one to whom every knee will bow. We are to work out our community life

together with the knowledge that we are in the presence of a holy God. An awesome and holy God does his best work in creating the church — and churches. God, especially where his community is concerned, is watching. How we view and treat each other within this community, and how we view and treat the community itself, is serious business.

Because God loves us, and because we recognize the awesomeness of his character and of his creation of spiritual community, we work out our life together. We seek to live together, serve one another and love one another.

When my wife Karen had surgery, we were blessed by the prayers, support and acts of kindness that rose up from our church community. I thought I would have to expand my culinary repertoire, but instead a woman in the church took it upon herself to sign people up to bring meals to our house for a month. She sent me this note: “If you need the meals to continue, don’t hesitate to ask, I have all of the Young Adults Fellowship to tap into.” I guess I should have expected such a response. These are the people of God, and this is his community. In contrast to what Karen and I have experienced, I’ve recently become aware of others who have become ill and are not part of such a community. The difference between their experience and ours is vast.

God is at work

Why should we obey God and work out our salvation? Because God is working in us — in the community. We might think that we should obey God to avoid his judgment. In verse 13, we don’t find God judging us; we find him helping us. God’s greatest work is the creation of his community. Therefore, he takes great interest in us. It makes sense, then, that he would help his community do what he wants it to do.

Some of us conclude that this community life stuff is just too hard, so we disobey the command. We wear our wounds proudly and we snipe at the community and certain individuals in it. We remain bitter and factious and aloof. Others of us try to obey the command but think it’s all up to us. If a problem arises, we think we can fix it. If someone’s attitude needs to be changed, we think we can change it. Paul offers a better way. That way is to believe that God through his Holy Spirit is working among us, to act on the belief and to look for signs of his work. God wants us to work out our life together, and he helps us do it. Stop fighting him. Let him work. Let him have his way.

Paul says that God works among us “to will and to act.” He puts the desire for community in every human being. Everyone, even a hermit, desires a community. It’s just that a hermit is trying to kill the desire. God gives followers of Jesus a desire for a spiritual community. Then, through his Holy Spirit, he gives us the desire to work out our salvation within a spiritual community. Our minds are being renewed by the Spirit.

If you are a follower of Jesus, God resides in your heart through his Holy Spirit. That means God is doing great things, beautiful things, in your heart. Sometimes you’ll feel those things. Sometimes, perhaps, you have to search your heart for them. Sometimes, because you don’t see them so well, someone else will point them out to you.

One of those beautiful things is the desire to be part of a spiritual community and thereby to be part of something much bigger than you. The biggest thing you can be a part of is a spiritual community through which God displays his glory to the world. For God to display his glory to the world through the community, those in the community must work out their salvation: They must learn to live together, serve one another and love one another despite their differences.

Paul says God is working among us to will this and to do this — to want it and to accomplish it. Therefore, God is working in your heart to love even someone you've been in conflict with. This "will" is in your heart. In recognizing that God is working among us, we let him have his way. He is working among us by working in each of our hearts. Stop fighting your heart. Let your heart have its way.

God not only gives us the will, he also gives us the way. He gives us the ability to act on our desires. He blesses the acts. He adds to them. He encourages us to keep acting. He fans the spark into a flame.

God's work in us is "according to his good purpose," or his good pleasure. Helping us pleases God. His ultimate pleasure is to display his glory through the community in which he is working. God exalted Christ for the sake of his glory (Philippians 2:11). He lifts his people up for the same reason.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the famous British preacher, told a story of a spiritist that illustrates the power of God at work in the community of God to bring glory to God:

She was ill one Sunday and could not go to keep her appointment. She was sitting in her house and she saw people passing by on their way to the church where I happened to be ministering in South Wales. Something made her feel a desire to know what those people had, and so she decided to go to the service, and did so. She came ever afterwards until she died, and became a very fine Christian. One day I asked her what she had felt on that first visit, and this is what she said to me, ... 'The moment I entered your chapel and sat down on a seat amongst the people, I was conscious of a power. I was conscious of the same sort of power as I was accustomed to in our spiritist meetings, but there was one big difference; I had a feeling that the power in your chapel was a clean power.' ... This is a mysterious element. It is the presence of the Spirit in the heart of God's children, God's people, and an outsider becomes aware of this.¹⁶

God is at work in each of us and in our midst in a powerful way to give us the desire to love and he is at work among us to bless our acts of love in order that his glory might be revealed to the world.

Work it out

In this passage, Paul calls for obedience, which he further defines as working out our salvation. In verses 14 through 18, he will get even more specific in applying the Christ story, further defining what he means by working out our salvation. For now, we're called to work it out with God's help: to learn, sometimes with great difficulty, to be a community.

Questions

1. Reflect on the differences between following rules and following the Lord.
2. How does it affect you to know that we are in the presence of a holy God when we work out our community life together as followers of Jesus?
3. How does it affect you to know that God is helping us work out our community life?
4. If you can identify within yourself a desire to be part of something larger than yourself, describe this desire.
5. How do you respond to this statement: "The biggest thing you can be a part of is a spiritual community through which God displays his glory to the world"?
6. If you sense that God has given you a desire to love, describe this experience.

Demonstrating What Our Father is Like

Children look somewhat like their parents. Sometimes a child looks more like her father; sometimes she looks more like her mother. Someone who knows the parents and looks at the child can then say something like, “You have the look of your mother,” or, “You have the look of your father.” Adam became the father of a son “in his own likeness, according to his image” (Genesis 5:3).

God, of course, has created humans in his image. When someone looks at a human, he should be able to recognize God’s likeness. The image of God in humanity was distorted in the fall, and untold carnage has resulted. God has set about restoring his image in humanity through Christ and the church. Now, when someone looks at a follower of Jesus and at a community of followers, he or she is supposed to be able to detect the likeness of God.

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:14-18 is concerned with how we reflect the image of God to the world. The scriptures call followers of Jesus children of God. Our Father’s likeness is particularly seen in the way we treat people and the way we relate. As we learn how to treat people and how to relate with one another, we, as children of God, show the world what our Father is like.

Philippians 2:14-18:

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life — in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Identifying and listening

When Paul says to “do everything,” he seems to have in mind the working out of our salvation — our life together in the community of God (verse 12). When you work out your salvation (with the knowledge, of course, that God is working in you), do it without complaining against each other or arguing with each other.

By the tone of his letter, and in view of his plea that two women in the church “agree with each other in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2), we can assume that friction was present among some of the believers in this church. We don’t know the nature of it. Paul has tackled the problem thus far by urging humility and unity for the sake of the gospel. Now he seems to be addressing the particular problem in a positive way. Instead of telling them to stop complaining and arguing, he tells them to do everything without complaining and arguing.

In most cases, we don’t set out looking for conflict. We run into it. We go about our business, we do “everything,” and in doing everything we bump into someone — or hear about someone — who does things differently. Whenever and wherever people meet, whether it’s 2,000 years ago in Macedonia or today in the Silicon Valley, differences will arise. The question, then, concerns how you deal with those differences. Many people fight wars, either with bullets or words. This seems to be the way of humanity. This is not the way of the church. Or, at least, Paul doesn’t want it to be the way.

The scriptures acknowledge and celebrate differences. The church is where those differences are supposed to be complementary, not divisive. So we are to work out our differences, and we are to do so in a certain way — without complaining about one another or arguing with one another. To do so, we must begin with a worldview that goes something like this:

Each person has been created by God in his image and is therefore, from Christ's perspective, worth dying for. Those who are in the family of God are then "new creatures" (2 Corinthians 5:17). They are all brothers and sisters "for whom Christ died" (Romans 14:15). The body of Christ needs eyes and ears and hands and all sorts of members (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Our brothers and sisters — even those with whom we disagree — are precious and necessary. Such a worldview gives us the perspective we need to work out our salvation.

So what do we do? The antithesis to complaining and arguing is identifying and listening. We identify with another's plight and we listen to him, or we devote our hearts to understanding someone. We can't do this while our minds are devoted to how we feel and finding words to state our case. We must offer the ears of our heart to understand the plight of another, even one who with whom we're in conflict. If we listen closely enough and drop our guard for a few moments and seek to put ourselves in the speaker's shoes, we'll probably be able to identify with him or her. There is, of course, a place for communicating our feelings, but in order for us to be understood, we must seek to understand.

Paul would have us do all this without complaining and arguing. So how do we discern the line between talking about someone and complaining about someone or the line between discussing and arguing? Paul publicly talked about people in a negative light (2 Timothy 4:10, 14). He rebuked people and urged the church to do so as well, when necessary (1 Timothy 5:20). Luke says Paul himself engaged in a "sharp disagreement" with Barnabas (Acts 15:39). If this instance was a problem, it was not that they disagreed; the problem was in their sharp tone.

Therefore, it is difficult to know what Paul means when he says to do everything without complaining or arguing. At the very least, he means to strive to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit" by appreciating the value and necessity of other people in the body of Christ and to act with this appreciation in mind (Ephesians 4:3). What we are communicating when we think and act this way, then, is that everyone is important.

Paul casts the Philippians in contrast to the Israelites who "grumbled" in the wilderness (Exodus 16:12, Numbers 14:1-38). (The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the same word for "grumble" that Paul uses for "complain.") Although the Israelites grumbled in a different way (against God and against Moses, not against each other), we can with confidence say that Paul has such a comparison in mind because of his surrounding references to the exodus story.

Children who shine like stars

Paul states his purpose for the imperative in verse 15. He wants them to do everything without complaining or arguing in order that they may "become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation." Paul is ultimately concerned with their witness to the world.

The witness in this case is in our relationships with one another. If this commandment is fulfilled, those outside the church will be able to look upon the way we relate to each other, differences and all, and find our behavior blameless and our hearts pure. The word "become" indicates that this is a process. We are progressively learning how to relate to one another and thus becoming blameless and

pure. As we do so, we, as his children, are showing the world what our Father is like. Some observers, then, will recognize us for what we are: children of God. They'll see God's likeness in us.

Those who were watching, and those whom the Philippians lived among, were part of a "crooked and depraved generation." What Paul particularly must be referring to are the societal fractures among the pagans. This generation — or any generation, for that matter — is no different. If we obey this command and thus become children of God as such, we will stand out against the surrounding world, which is ruled by violence and division, though in many ways is looking for love and peace.

As we learn to love one another and be God's community, we "shine like stars in the universe." Israel was called to be the light to the world by revealing God to the world. Jesus said, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5). He has passed on his vocation to the church, his body in the world. Thus Jesus also said, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). How we relate to one another says a great deal to the world about who God is. How we relate to each other is also closely related to our unity, which is necessary to reveal God to the world. Jesus was speaking of us when he prayed, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:20, 23). As the light of the world, we show this crooked and depraved generation, most effectively by the way we love, that there is a better way of being human. Then the people dwelling in darkness will see a great light.

As we shine, we also "hold out the word of life." We hold onto the gospel and present the gospel to the world. We serve up Christ. In that it is the word of life, the gospel offers the life of God to the world. The people of this crooked and depraved generation are not only dwelling in darkness; they are also dying. They need the light and life of the gospel. They need to see that Jesus is Lord and receive the life of God. Our unity of purpose is created and nurtured by humility and our common love for Christ, which motivate us to stop arguing and complaining, and this unity gives us the ability and credibility to offer Jesus to the world.

We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because God is watching (verse 12). We are to do everything without complaining or arguing because the world is watching.

For Paul, the Philippians' holding onto and holding out the gospel will result in his being able to "boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing." The day of Christ is the day when Christ returns to establish his eternal kingdom. Paul has already noted that he has every confidence that the Philippians will persevere until that day (Philippians 1:6). Paul's boasting, then, will be about "what Christ has accomplished through me" (Romans 15:18), for he says in Galatians 6:14, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ ... " He also says, "For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory [literally "boast"] in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy" (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). The boasting Paul expects to do combines joy in the Philippians' eternal reward and satisfaction that his work had something to do with it.

It is good for us to desire fruit from our labor. Moses, lamenting the fleeting nature of life, prayed that the Lord would "establish the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:17). We want our work to count for something and to last. Can you imagine what it will be like, in the presence of the Lord Jesus, to look into the eyes of a brother or sister in Christ and know that you had something to do with the way he or she will spend eternity? That anticipation makes all our strivings for earthly rewards and all our boasting in earthly things seem pathetic. Let's save our boasting for the day of Christ.

Paul is telling them about the boasting he hopes to do in order to inspire them. He's like a father who tells his son, "Do me proud."

Verses 15 and 16 are full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures. Deuteronomy 32:5, which involves the exodus, is particularly noteworthy. In that verse, Moses said of the Israelites in the wilderness: “They have acted corruptly toward him; to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation.” After being released from Egypt, the Israelites in the wilderness wandered from the Lord and were, in Moses’ words, no longer God’s children. On the other hand, Paul sees the Philippians as “children of God.” So whereas Moses calls Israel in the wilderness a “warped and crooked generation,” Paul says the Philippians shine like stars *in* a “crooked and depraved generation.” We are the wilderness people of God. Paul is telling us, “Get it right this time.”

And how do we get it right? We love each other. Supported and encouraged by the community of God, we carry the light and life of God’s love into the darkness and death of this world. This world is dark and dying because it is crooked and depraved, having eschewed God and what he values. But we have the grand and glorious opportunity to dispel the darkness and bring life out of death by lighting up this generation with the love of Christ.

Our generation, and the place we live in, is a relational mess. People simply do not know how to relate. Power, fear and distance rule over love, courage and intimacy. Sex is a disaster. Families are in shambles. People are destroying each other, and they are becoming increasingly isolated. We, on the other hand, are learning how to relate. We are learning to follow in the footsteps of our Lord and to humble ourselves and consider others as more important than ourselves. We’re learning how to be God’s community. We are learning to work out our salvation and to do everything without grumbling or complaining. Here’s a way that we can help people dwelling in darkness: We can show them a different way of relating, a different way of dealing with conflict, a different way of associating with the opposite sex, a different way of living in community. All these ways affirm the dignity and worth of each and every person. We can take the way we’re learning to relate and introduce it to this generation by modeling and, when given the opportunity, speaking about it.

Recently a man with whom I had spent three years sharing Christ accepted the Lord. I had invited him to play golf on several occasions with some other believers from this church. He told me on many occasions how different his experience with us was from his experience with other friends with whom he played golf. The way we related to each other and to him was different, he said. The way he felt at the end of each round was also different. He felt people were interested in him. They asked him questions about himself. They seemed interested in listening. Furthermore, in contrast to other experiences, the brothers in Christ weren’t cutting one another down. His experience with us contributed to his decision to accept Christ.

Rejoicing together

The end of verse 16 could leave the impression that Paul is pessimistic about the Philippians. Paul makes sure to avoid leaving such an impression with verses 17 and 18.

The grammar indicates that Paul is, in fact, being poured out like a drink offering. This does not mean that Paul expects to be executed. It means that he is suffering for the faith. A drink offering involved pouring wine on top of another offering (Numbers 28:7). The Philippians are also suffering for their faith, as Paul already noted in Philippians 1:29-30. The Philippians, then, are making their own offering, which Paul calls the “sacrifice and service coming from your faith.” Paul sees his suffering combined with their suffering as a joint offering to God. This common suffering and joint offering is a cause for celebration in Paul’s eyes. He rejoices as an individual and with them, and he urges them to do the same.

Throughout the scriptures, suffering for Christ is presented as cause for celebration. Acts 5:41: “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” Suffering as an individual is one thing. Suffering with others who are committed to the same cause raises it to a different level. All those who want to follow Jesus will suffer in some way. When we follow Jesus, we take up a cross (Matthew 16:24). Those who suffer together have stronger connections. Those who suffer together for a common cause have stronger connections still. Those who suffer together for Jesus have the strongest connections possible. To have some fellow sufferers to share Christ with is cause for rejoicing indeed. Look for some brothers and sisters who share your passion for Christ. Pray with them. Serve with them. Suffer with them. Rejoice with them. You will cherish these relationships for all eternity.

God’s reputation is at stake

Paul, like a father speaking to his son, encourages the Philippians to do him proud. We carry our Father’s image into the world. His reputation is at stake in the way we relate. Through this passage, our heavenly Father is telling us, “Do me proud.”

Questions

1. Consider how you might work to identify with someone with whom you have differences.
2. Consider how you might listen to someone with whom you have differences.
3. What have you learned about relating to others?
4. How does it influence you to know that the way you relate to others in the family of God has a bearing on the reputation of the gospel in the world?
5. Consider how Acts 5:41 relates to your life: “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus].”

Devoted to the Work of Christ

By the time John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania entered the stadium in Mexico City, most of the crowd in the stands had dissipated. There were only a few thousand left. Akhwari was representing his country in the marathon in the 1968 Olympics. He had injured his leg during the race. The other runners left him behind, but he continued. When Akhwari entered the stadium for the final lap, the race had been over for more than an hour. His right leg was bandaged in two places, and he was wincing with every step. Upon seeing the solitary runner, the remaining spectators began to clap as Akhwari hobbled around the track. As he stumbled across the finish line, holding his injured leg with both hands, the crowd roared. Filmmaker Bud Greenspan later asked him, “Why did you do this? You were in such pain, and you couldn’t win.” Greenspan recalls Akhwari’s reaction: “He looked at me like I was crazy. ‘Mr. Greenspan, I don’t think you understand. My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish it.’”¹⁷

Such was that man’s devotion to his country. In the book of Philippians, we meet two men who were similarly devoted. We know nothing of their devotion to their country. The scriptures tell us of their devotion to Christ and his work. Their stories serve as inspiration for us to also devote ourselves to the work of Christ.

Paul offers up Timothy and Epaphroditus as two models to follow. These two men join Paul (Philippians 1:12-26, 3:4-14) and the ultimate example, Christ (Philippians 2:5-11), to provide powerful paradigms for self-giving love.

Timothy and the work of the gospel

Philippians 2:19-24:

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

Paul wants to hear how the Philippians receive his letter, and he expects to rejoice when he hears the news of their response. He plans therefore to send Timothy to Philippi and then hear from him when he returns. He can’t come to Philippi himself at this time, of course, because he’s in prison. Paul is waiting to learn more details about his own situation before he sends Timothy so that the Philippians can be updated regarding his plight. Paul expects to be released from prison at some point (Philippians 1:24-26), so he himself expects to visit them soon.

So much for the comings and goings. What’s significant is the character of Timothy. What does Paul intend for the Philippians and, by extension, us to learn from his description of Timothy?

Paul says he has no one else, literally, of “like soul,” who will take a genuine interest in the Philippians’ welfare. The souls of Paul and Timothy are alike in that they each genuinely care for the Philippians. The first thing that sets Timothy apart, then, is that he genuinely cares for others. Paul earlier told the Philippians, “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the

interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). The word translated “welfare” in verse 20 is the same word that is translated “interests” in verse 4. Literally, the word would be translated “things.” Christ served as Paul’s model for looking out for the things of others in Philippians 2:5-11. Timothy, walking in the footsteps of Christ, is another model for what Paul wants to see in the Philippians — someone who is looking out for the needs of others.

Paul says he has no one else to send to the Philippians who shares his concern for them. He probably means that of those who are free to travel at this time, Timothy is the only one who meets this criterion. Everyone else who is available “looks out for his own interests [literally, ‘things’], not those of Jesus Christ.” These people would be like the preachers Paul described in Philippians 1:15-17, who preached Christ out of envy, rivalry and selfish ambition rather than goodwill and love. Evidently, Timothy cares about the “things” of the Philippians because he looks out for the “things” of Christ. Christ’s “things” *are* the “things” of others. His interest is the welfare of the Philippians — and all people, of course.

Paul has not simply conjectured that Timothy cares for the interests of Christ; Timothy has “proved himself.” The context in which his character was formed and tested was his joint ministry with Paul. He served with Paul to advance the gospel as “a son with his father.” The gospel, as it moves forward, advances the interests of Christ, which focus on people. Not only has Timothy shown that the advance of the gospel is important to him, he has also shown that he can serve with others to advance the gospel. As we have observed elsewhere in our study of the Philippians, the cause of advancing the gospel brings people together and creates deep relationships (Philippians 1:5). The gospel created something like a father-son relationship between Paul and Timothy. They became soul mates. In his relationship with Paul, Timothy demonstrated humility, becoming like a son serving his father. In this sense, he became like Christ, who took the very nature of a servant and became obedient to his Father (Philippians 2:7-8).

So much of what masquerades as love is not love at all but infatuation or manipulation. When people say, “I love you,” oftentimes what they really mean is, “You make me feel good.” When people express interest, oftentimes what they really want is for someone to do something for them. Timothy, on the other hand, took a “genuine interest” in the welfare of others. Because so much of what appears to be love is not love at all, people keep their guards up. They’re less inclined to take expressed interest at face value and are waiting for evidence of genuine interest.

Here’s what we have to offer each other and the world: genuine interest, genuine love. But that raises another question: How do you develop genuine interest for others? Sometimes, it seems that we are so focused on our own things that we can’t get outside ourselves to take an interest in the things of others. For Timothy, genuine interest in the things of others resulted from genuine interest in the things of Christ. This tells us that to care for people the way Timothy cared for people we must connect with Christ. This message was in Philippians 1:1-11, and it reappears here. It must be an important one. Learn all you can about Christ. Open up to Christ. Draw near to Christ. If you have difficulty drawing near, cry out to God for intimacy with Christ. As you connect with Christ, his love for you softens your heart. His interests become your interests. You will find yourself, perhaps even to your own surprise, taking a genuine interest in others.

Paul castigates those who were looking out for their own interests, but with a foundation in intimacy with God, our own interests merge with the interests of Christ. Our deepest needs are met in relationship with Christ. It is in our interest to take an interest in the things of Christ and, therefore, the things of others. God created us to love others, and he gives us Christ that we might do so. Then,

as we take an interest in others by seeking to advance the gospel, we, like Timothy, find soul mates with similar interests.

Timothy's character was forged and tested through ministry with Paul. Character is forged and tested in the field, so to speak. Paul took Timothy under his wing and gave him a chance. Timothy didn't start out having it all together, and neither do we. We act on the interest we have in Christ and others, even if that pull isn't as strong as we'd like it to be. If we serve with others, particularly those who may be a little more experienced than we, we'll see their hearts and learn from them, as Timothy did from Paul. If we venture out, we'll often find our interest in the things of Christ and others being aroused — and our character being both forged and tested.

Epaphroditus and the work of Christ

Philippians 2:25-30:

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Epaphroditus is one of the Philippians. He had traveled from Philippi to the location of Paul's imprisonment in order to give him a gift from the church (Philippians 4:18). Paul is hoping to send Timothy to the Philippians and he's hoping to come himself, but for now he sends Epaphroditus with Paul's letter. Thus Paul calls him "your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs." Paul's description of Epaphroditus shows the close relationship that the gospel has created between the two of them, just as it has created a close relationship between Paul and Timothy. Paul calls Epaphroditus his "brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier." He sees the task of advancing the gospel as both work and war. Epaphroditus and Paul have labored and fought together, and a tight bond has resulted. But the time has come for Epaphroditus, who has been wounded in battle, so to speak, to go home.

Paul considered it necessary to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi because of Epaphroditus' feelings for his brothers and sisters. Epaphroditus "longs for" them; he misses them. He is also "distressed" because they have heard that he was sick. The Philippians had somehow received word that Epaphroditus was sick. Perhaps he became ill on the way to visit Paul and someone in the traveling party turned back to inform the church while Epaphroditus soldiered on. At any rate, Epaphroditus cares so much about the distress his brothers and sisters are undergoing on his behalf that he wants to return to set their minds at ease. He seems more concerned about their feelings about his illness than the illness itself.

Paul says Epaphroditus almost died, but God healed him. Again, Paul's intense connection with Epaphroditus is on display, for if he had died, Paul would have experienced "sorrow upon sorrow."

Paul's reasons for sending Epaphroditus are based not only on Epaphroditus' perspective but also on his own perspective. He knows that Epaphroditus' return will cause the Philippians to be glad. Furthermore, their joy at seeing Epaphroditus alive and well will lessen Paul's anxiety in prison. Paul longs for the Philippians just as Epaphroditus does (Philippians 1:8). He cares for them so much that their well-being will lighten his load in prison.

Paul now encourages the Philippians to honor people such as Epaphroditus. Again, just as he did with Timothy, he's holding Epaphroditus up as an example. Epaphroditus makes Paul's honor roll because he "almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me." The Philippians had wanted to minister to Paul but couldn't because of his distance from them. They therefore could not give Paul the help they wanted to give him. So they sent Epaphroditus with their gift. Paul is by no means criticizing them here (1 Corinthians 16:17), but he is by all means praising Epaphroditus.

Timothy served with Paul in the "work of the gospel," and Epaphroditus almost died for the "work of Christ." In the case of Epaphroditus, the work of Christ was bringing the Philippians' gift to Paul. Paul, whose mission is to advance the gospel, considers anything that ministers to his needs as contributing to the work of Christ. Verse 30 seems to imply that Epaphroditus became sick on the way to visit Paul but was intent on completing his mission. What's important to note is that Epaphroditus considers the work of Christ worth risking his life for and that he acted on that belief. Literally, he drew near "until death," just as Christ was obedient, literally, "until death" (Philippians 2:8). Like Timothy, Epaphroditus is walking in the footsteps of Christ.

For us, what is the work of the gospel, also described as the work of Christ? The gospel proclamation is that "Jesus is Lord." Introducing the lordship of Christ to our world, then, is the work of the gospel and the work of Christ. One thing that often happens for people when passions for Christ and the gospel are kindled is that they find less fulfillment in their so-called "secular" jobs and begin entertaining the idea of what's called "full-time ministry," which supposedly has something more to do with Christ and the gospel. The Lord does, of course, move people from one sphere to another, and the tugging on one's heart is not to be diminished. But one sphere is not inherently better, or more sacred, than another. All of life is ministry. The scriptures advocate a comprehensive approach to life.

If Epaphroditus' journey to supply Paul with resources constitutes the work of Christ, certainly any job that earns money that can be devoted to the work of Christ should also be considered the work of Christ. Paul himself made tents for a living. It was the work of Christ.

We go to work. We earn money. That money is used for the work of Christ. The job, therefore, is the work of Christ. So far, it makes sense. But does the job, aside from its moneymaking function, have value as far as the work of Christ is concerned? Yes, if we look at it as an opportunity to bring the lordship of Christ to bear on the workplace. This means caring for our co-workers and, when given the opportunity, sharing the gospel with them. This means doing our jobs well, "as working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23). It also means, insofar as you have opportunity, thinking and praying strategically about bringing the influence of Christ to bear on the way your company operates. God took the first human and put him in a garden to "work it and take care of it" — to bring the influence of heaven to bear on earth and, presumably, to extend that influence to the rest of the earth. Your workplace is the garden in which God has placed you. All you do is Christ's work. In Philippians 3:20, we'll see that we are citizens of heaven but colonists on earth, bringing the influence of heaven to earth.

What is the work of Christ worth? For Epaphroditus, it was worth his life. Bringing the influence of Christ to bear on the world is worth your life. No greater cause exists. If it's worth your life, it's worth everything you have and everything you can give. It's worth your thoughts, your energy, your prayers, your time, your money.

Connecting with Timothy and Epaphroditus

This passage sets forth as examples two people whose lives we can connect with. I have considered some ways in which I see them connecting with my life. I offer my story in hope that you, too, will connect with Timothy and Epaphroditus and be inspired by them.

I came to Christ at the age of 16, but it wasn't until I was 28 that I began seeking to devote my life to the work of Christ. The first step I took was to look for some way to serve outside my workplace in order to express the love of God to others. I did not feel all that interested in the cause of Christ, and I did not feel like a very loving person. But God was stirring in my heart, and I knew I needed to act. I suppose I acted on the interest that I found in me, such as it was.

I began serving as a leader in a church youth group. The crucible of that youth group was where my character was forged and tested. I found that I loved the teenagers much more than I thought I would. I found that I loved studying and teaching the scriptures much more than I expected. Yet, I also faced struggles. Oftentimes, I felt as if "ministry" were more about me — how I performed, how others responded to me, how I felt about myself — than about Christ or those to whom I was ministering. I felt as if my "things" were more important than their "things."

My awareness of this self-centeredness drove me to Christ, and I connected with him at a deeper level. Connecting with Christ more deeply connected me more profoundly with his things — the people he loved. It propelled me outward. I continued to struggle, but now I faced a holy struggle. The work of Christ thrust me toward Christ, and meeting Christ thrust me toward the work of Christ. Somehow, my genuine interest in the things of Christ and the things of others grew deeper. I have to admit: After all these years, I face the same struggle. Sometimes in my heart, I feel as if it's about me, not Christ. This saddens me and remains a holy struggle.

As I became more passionate about youth ministry, I began to view my job as ministry as well. I worked as an editor for a newspaper in the East Bay. This was also a struggle, but I found a few opportunities to share the gospel and encourage other believers who worked there. However, as my passion grew for the scriptures and shepherding, my passion for journalism faded. My heart was stirring again, and I was receiving unsolicited advice from others in the body that I should pursue this teaching and shepherding thing more vigorously. I sought to quiet the stirring in my heart and ignore the advice I was receiving. Heading off in a completely different direction after working as a journalist for 11 years seemed just a little "out there" to me. Plus, I had come to view my job as the work of Christ. I occupied a position of influence in the media. I had something to do with the way the news was presented to the community. Such a position was not to be abandoned lightly.

Yet my heart was cold for journalism and on fire for the scriptures. So I told God that if he wanted me to move on, I'd move on. He took me up on my offer. I quit my job at age 32 and went off to get some theological training, and that led to my job as a pastor. I have worked as a journalist and as a pastor. From a biblical perspective, one was no less ministry than the other.

I'm not sure anyone could say that I've risked my life for the work of Christ, as Epaphroditus did. I suppose the closest I've come is traveling to Pakistan on two occasions in order to teach the scriptures, first at a pastors' conference and second at an evangelistic campaign. However, when I went, things were not as volatile as they became after Sept. 11, 2001. During my second trip, our host told us of an American evangelist who wouldn't preach in Pakistan without a bulletproof vest. He happened to tell me this a few hours before I was to preach the gospel to a few thousand. This didn't faze me, mostly, I think, because the possibility of something happening seemed remote. Still, it was something of a risk, and the gospel is worth the risk.

The first time I visited Pakistan, I was single. I made the decision to go in a snap. The second time, I was married. The second trip illustrated to me the importance of marrying a follower of Jesus. I'm seeking to devote my life to work of Christ, even to risk my life for it. I don't know what I would have faced if I had come home to a wife who believed neither in Christ nor his work and asked her what she

thought about my traveling to Pakistan to stand up in front of thousands to preach the gospel. I am thankful that I have a wife who is devoted to Christ and his work. Our hearts beat for the same cause.

Now I have to say that though I would hardly think twice about preaching in Pakistan, even now, I am not so bold when it comes to sharing the gospel in my own country. For some reason, bullets don't scare me as much as the risk of others' perception of me when I share the gospel with them. This is another holy struggle.

These are some of the ways I connect with Timothy and Epaphroditus. In connecting with them, I hope the Holy Spirit enables me to more fully embrace the work of Christ. How about you?

Questions

1. What masquerades for sincere love in our day?
2. How do you connect with Christ, or how might you consider connecting with Christ?
3. How has your character been formed and tested? What steps might you consider taking so that your character may be formed and tested?
4. Reflect on how you might consider and act upon the biblical supposition that your job is “the work of Christ.”
5. If bringing the influence of Christ to bear on the world is worth your life, what may need to change about the way you think and act?
6. How do you connect with the stories of Timothy and Epaphroditus?

Remembering Who We Are

In the movie *The Lion King*, Simba, a young lion, is questioning his identity. His destiny is to be king, but he is resistant. Then his dead father, Mufasa, appears to him in a vision and tells him:

Simba, you have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are and so forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. ... Remember who you are. You are my son, and the one true king. Remember who you are. Remember. Remember. Remember ...¹⁸

“Who am I?” That is a question for the ages, not just Disney movies. The scriptures tell us that those of us who follow Jesus have an identity. We are children of God. Like Simba, we are sons and daughters of a king. Put another way, we are the people of God, marked out as such by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Whatever else can be said of us, this is who we are. But often it’s the “whatever-else-can-be-said-of-us” that distracts us, or at least the “whatever-else-we’d-like-to-be-said-of-us.” We’re attracted by alternative definitions put forth by the culture we come from or live in. Each culture has its own marks of identity, usually defined by the heritage and achievement of its members. These markers serve as a way of telling who’s “in” and who’s “out,” mostly so that those who are in can feel significant and secure.

The Apostle Paul, in Philippians 3:1-6, warns us against grasping for and clinging to these false identity markers, and he reminds us of who we are. The text is rich in contemporary meaning, but first we must try to understand the historical setting.

Philippians 3:1-6:

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh — though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

(The structure of the passage features two lists of seven, each of which features a center point — the fourth description in each list. A more literal translation demonstrates the grammatical connections, and a schematic presentation demonstrates the structure.¹⁹)

False people of God

The words translated “finally” here would carry the sense of “well, then” or “as for the rest.” Paul tells them to “rejoice in the Lord” (the Lord is Jesus, as in Philippians 2:11), which would be an antidote for the mindset of those depicted in verse 2. Rejoicing in the Lord mitigates the need to put confidence

“in” the flesh (verse 3). The “same things” that Paul writes again are his warnings and exhortations that follow. Evidently, the Philippians have heard this before.

Paul warns his readers, literally, to “see” the people he describes in three ways: “dogs,” “men who do evil” and “mutilators of the flesh.” These are people who take pride in their Jewish heritage. They may have been Jewish evangelists who urged followers of Jesus to abandon Christ in favor of Judaism. They are probably not the “Judaizers” Paul writes of in Galatians who are trying themselves to follow Jesus and convince the Gentiles to be circumcised as part of following Jesus. If they were, Paul would probably not combat their teachings by saying that he was once like them, a persecutor of the church (verse 6), because the Judaizers were not, in fact, persecutors of the church. These Jews were not followers of Jesus. Each description features more than a little irony.

Dogs were scavengers that Jews considered unclean. Jews, of course, considered Gentiles unclean and even used the term for Gentiles (Matthew 15:21-28). Like dogs, Gentiles ate food that, from a Jewish perspective, was ceremonially unclean. A good Jew, on the other hand, observed prescribed food laws and kept himself pure. Paul turns the tables on these people and says that they are unclean. They are like the pagans.

These Jews, of course, would have thought of themselves as doers of righteousness, in accordance with the Mosaic Law. By relying on the law, they are actually evildoers according to Paul. They are like the pagans.

The noun translated “mutilators of the flesh” (*katatomē*) is a play on words with the noun translated “circumcision” (*peritomē*). It would be more literally translated “mutilation,” although such a translation still would not indicate the grammatical relationship between the words. Circumcision was supposed to signify that one belonged to God’s covenant people. The Levitical priests were prohibited from cutting themselves (Leviticus 21:5). Now, however, those Jews who are trusting in their circumcision are more like the pagans, who cut themselves for their gods (1 Kings 18:28).

True people of God

Paul, on the other hand, rather emphatically states that it is “we who are the circumcision.” The pronoun “we” encompasses Paul, a Jewish follower of Jesus, and the Gentile followers of Jesus in Philippi. The believers in Jesus, both Jew and Gentile, now constitute the covenant people of God. In Christ “there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11). The Lord has always been after a circumcision of the heart: hearts that belong to him (Deuteronomy 30:6). Paul, in an allusion to Deuteronomy 30:6, says in Romans 2:28-29: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.” He also writes in Colossians 2:11-12: “In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Paul offers a description of the true people of God to counter his description of the false people of God. This description is in keeping with the true and now fully realized nature of circumcision he elucidates in Colossians and Romans. The new identity markers, if you will, are the Spirit of God and Christ Jesus. Paul says elsewhere that we have been marked in Christ with a “seal” — the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

First, the people of God “worship by the Spirit of God.” True worship and service are called forth by the Holy Spirit, who resides in each believer. God initiates. He takes responsibility. It is at his impulse that we worship him, serve him and follow Jesus.

Second, the people of God literally “boast in Christ Jesus.” Whereas the Jews would find circumcision and other ethnic markers to boast in to prove their covenant membership, Paul says the only thing the true people of God have to boast about is Christ. They know they only belong to God because of Christ. Paul probably has in mind Jeremiah 9:23-24, where the Lord says, “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.” The people of God know the Lord, Christ Jesus. As far as their qualifications for covenant membership are concerned, this is the only thing about which they can boast.

Third, the people of God “put no confidence in the flesh.” The Jews whom Paul is castigating trust in the flesh — they trust in their ethnic heritage and observances, particularly the cutting away of their “flesh,” to set them off as the people of God. As Paul says in Romans 10:3, the Israelites sought their “own” national righteousness. They relied on their ethnic status and the supposedly inalienable privilege that it provided. And they tended to be rather exclusive about it. The identity markers for the people of God have nothing to do with ethnic heritage and observances and everything to do with the Spirit of God and Christ Jesus — and with faith, as Paul will say in verses 7 through 11.

Paul’s history

In verse 4, Paul says that if he wanted to play the game these Jews are playing, he could lick any of them. In fact, Paul used to play that game. His identity markers were the same as those advocated by these Jews. But that is all behind him now. Such identity markers are also behind the people of God, as the true meaning of those markers has been brought forth in the new covenant. For Paul, there is no future in the past.

Paul describes his former life in seven ways. Structurally, this balances the seven total ways in which he described the Jews (three ways) and the people of God (four ways) in verses 2 and 3. The center point in the previous list was his affirmation that “it is we who are the circumcision.” The center point in this list about his life is his description of himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” Leading up to this center point, the list focuses on ethnic heritage, or covenant membership. On the other side of the center point, it focuses on ethnic accomplishment, or the expression of covenant membership.

Paul was “circumcised on the eighth day,” in accordance with the law (Genesis 17:12, Leviticus 12:3). Some Jews, for whatever reason, were not circumcised on the eighth day. Paul is saying, “They got it right with me.” He is “of the people of Israel” by birth, not conversion. He is “of the tribe of Benjamin,” which was a tribe of prominence for many of reasons, not the least of which being that it was one of only two tribes, along with Judah, to which one’s heritage could still be traced.

Based on his heritage and leading into his accomplishments, Paul says he is “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” By breeding and accomplishment, he would be considered an elite member of the nation of Israel.

The final three descriptions each begin with a word that the New International Version translates in two different ways: “in regard to” and “as for.” The first three descriptions affirm that he was a purebred Israelite. The final three descriptions put forth his accomplishments as an Israelite.

He chose to join, and was accepted into, the sect of Pharisees, who advocated scrupulous observance of the Mosaic Law.

If a Jew was said to have “zeal,” it meant that he was passionate about God, the law, Jewish traditions and the purity of Israel (Acts 21:20, Romans 10:2-3). Many who were zealous in this way were willing to engage in holy war to purify Israel and overthrow enemies. The revolutionaries who advocated the overthrow of Rome were called Zealots. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul had seen the church, composed almost solely of Jews early on, as a corrupting influence in Israel. So he persecuted it. He writes about this in Galatians 1:13-14: “You have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous of the traditions of my fathers.”

Finally, he says that he was “faultless” in regard to, literally, the “righteousness in the law.” He does not mean that he lived a perfect life; he means that he lived as an observant Jew. He followed the Sabbath, food laws and feasts (Colossians 2:16). He kept short accounts with God, participating in the sacrificial system and the Day of Atonement. Paul could probably have said, as another Israelite said regarding the Ten Commandments, “All these I have kept since I was a boy” (Luke 18:21). No one could fault him in these respects.

Paul would not have said that any of these accomplishments enabled him to be a member of the people of God, as if he could have earned such a status. No, these were the ways in which he expressed his covenant membership. Nevertheless, such accomplishments for a Jew would tend to affirm his status and generate “confidence in the flesh” — confidence that he belonged to God because of ethnic privilege.

What it meant to the Philippians

Why did Paul write these verses? The word translated “watch out for” would be more literally translated “see.” Here, it probably means to observe those people who claim covenant membership based on racial heritage and express it through accomplishments that would have been honored in their culture. Paul must mean, “Don’t be like them.” But why would mostly Gentile followers of Jesus in the city of Philippi need to be told this? How might they tend to adopt a similar outlook on life?

Perhaps they were faced with some temptation to convert to Judaism. The Philippian believers were being persecuted for their faith (Philippians 1:29-30), and Judaism was a safer, more established — but still monotheistic — option in the Roman empire.

Also, and probably more significantly, Philippi was a Roman colony, and many of its residents had Roman citizenship, which carried with it certain privileges. Both the Jews and the Philippians, then, would tend to consider themselves children of status and privilege. Those Jews who opposed Jesus and his people became like the pagans: dogs, evil doers and mutilators of the flesh. The Romans, of course, were pagans to begin with. In this letter, Paul takes particular aim against the pagan claims of Caesar, who called himself savior and lord. For Paul, Christ alone is Savior and Lord. The Philippians were beholden to Caesar for their status and privileges as Roman citizens.

What would it mean, then, for the Philippians to put confidence in the flesh? It would mean either gravitating toward the particular Jewish “flesh” or clinging to and boasting in the status and privileges granted them by Caesar, even bowing down to him, instead of clinging to and boasting in Christ and bowing down to him. No doubt one would do certain things to express his or her Roman citizenship, just as Jews did certain things to express their covenant membership. Such actions would affirm one’s status and generate confidence in the flesh — pride in status and related achievements.

There’s nothing wrong with being a Roman citizen, just as there’s nothing wrong with being a Jew. There’s nothing wrong with any tribe, any race or any nation. Yet there is something wrong

with every tribe. Every tribe is made up sinners. In a collective sense, then, no tribe puts its trust in God. Not knowing what else to trust in but needing to trust in something, the tribe trusts in itself. A tribal, or national, consciousness develops. In order to prop up this cultural consciousness, each tribe wants to think of itself as superior. The members, then, take pride in their membership. Each cultural consciousness develops differently, so each tribe has different identity markers and different ways for its members to express their membership.

For the Jews, the marks of identity were circumcision, adherence to the Mosaic Law, and, in some cases, revolutionary zeal. Nothing was wrong with circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic Law (although something was wrong with revolutionary zeal, in that it disobeyed God's design for Israel to be a light to the nations). In fact, everything was right about them. They were ordained by God. They were given by God so that the people might know and follow him. However, the markers were taken by many people as a platform for national privilege, pride and exclusivity. In other words, they were seen as reasons for confidence in the flesh.

What it means for us

Finally, and most importantly, we have to ask ourselves what all this means for us. What is the nature of the national or tribal flesh in which we may tend to put confidence instead of putting confidence in the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives? To answer this question, we have to ask ourselves what tribes we tend to identify with. Then we have to ask ourselves what the identity markers of these tribes are. Again, nothing is wrong with belonging to any of these tribes. We need to be concerned with how we put confidence in the tribal identity markers only to the extent that they compete with our allegiance to Christ. We know this tendency is in us because we want our schools and our teams, our cities and our nations to triumph, and we root hard for them to do so.

We may have a visceral attachment to the identity markers of our ethnic or national tribe. If you're an American, what marks you out as such? Perhaps achieving the "American Dream" of success, wealth, notoriety and home ownership. Rugged individualism. Self-assertiveness. Expressing so-called "freedom" in whatever way pleases you. Pride in economic and military superiority. If you're of Asian descent, what marks you out as being part of your culture? Perhaps being able to speak the mother tongue. Academic achievement. Choosing and succeeding in the right kind of career and achieving a position of status. Saving face. Honoring the family.

Then there are all sorts of smaller "tribes" — the people you hang with. These smaller tribes, or cliques, usually develop their own identity markers, much as college fraternities and sororities. When I graduated from college, I hung out with two guys all the time. The three of us thought that no one was as cool as we were. If I told you what we thought made us cool, you'd laugh your heads off. We had our own tribal identity markers, complete with inside jokes that we thought were the funniest things ever. We all believed in Christ, but the tribe took precedence — and had very little to do with Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Paul talks about how, if he wanted to, he could boast in the flesh not only as a Jew but also as a follower of Jesus. Thus, we must acknowledge our "evangelical Christian" identity markers. Dutiful church attendance. Regular quiet times. Thorough biblical knowledge. Doctrinal purity. Involvement in "ministry." Consistent "witnessing." Adherence to a particular church system. The list goes on. Nothing is wrong with these activities, but they will engulf you with guilt, pride or exhaustion if you're looking to place your identity in them. If, on the other hand, the Spirit

of God is calling forth these activities not as a means of propping up your identity but as a way of responding to the love of Christ, then they assume their proper and quite satisfying place.

Lee Knapp writes of how his church culture frustrated him:

While nothing I had been taught was in any way contrary to scripture, the church culture, one in which I rarely felt like myself, applied layer upon layer of conformity. Being insulated in such a culture either took away an honest estimation of sin, as people became spiritually proud, or it made them preoccupied with their sin in trying to eliminate it. I won lots of morality points and spiritual status this way, but in the end I lost my humanity.²⁰

Paul has two categories for the flesh: The first pertains to heritage, or that which is obtained by birth, and the second pertains to achievement, or what one does with what one obtains by birth. Taking pride in anything, be it heritage or achievement, is ludicrous, of course. What did any of us have to do with what tribe we were born into or what innate abilities we have? Nothing, of course. Am I “proud to be an American”? If so, what did I have to do with creating the land the country occupies, let alone the philosophy and system of government? I just happened to be born here. Then we may want to say, “Well, perhaps I had nothing to do with the hand that was dealt me, but I played it to the best of my ability.” But where did the ability, be it physical or mental, come from? Not from us. The tribal identity markers we grasp for and cling to are meaningless, and they distract us from “sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). The Apostle John writes, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes and boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 John 2:16).

In moving toward Christ, many of us have sought to move away from the call of certain identity markers and points of pride. But we still hear their echo, and they haunt us like a bad memory. For Paul, there is no future in the past. For us, there is no future in the past. There is no future in tribal heritage or achievement. The future belongs to God. Listen to his voice.

The call is to live by the Spirit and boast in Christ. We belong to God solely because of Christ. Because of Christ, we are part of God’s tribe, which is composed of members of every tribe (Revelation 5:9). The Holy Spirit resides within us to reveal to us the glory of Christ and to motivate and empower us to activity that brings honor to God. Don’t put your confidence in the flesh. Don’t find your identity or your worth or your security in your heritage or your achievements. Put your trust in the Lord.

Scholar Richard Lovelace writes of how, trusting the Lord, we can freely enter our culture — or any culture:

Thus men who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures.²¹

When we worship God, we connect with Christ and the Spirit. In so doing, we remind ourselves of who we are. We are children of God through Christ, born not of the flesh but of the Spirit. We have a new identity. We are members of God's tribe. We worship that we might be thrust out by God again into the cultures of this world, being filled with the Spirit and Christ, repelling confidence in fleshly heritage and achievement, and holding high the banner God.

Questions

1. What "tribes" do you identify with, and what are the identity markers of those tribes?
2. Have you in any way experienced guilt, pride or exhaustion because you sought to find your identity in such markers? If so, describe this experience.
3. If you have sought to move toward Christ and away from confidence in such identity markers, describe this experience.
4. How do you think the Holy Spirit may be speaking to you about putting confidence in Christ instead of tribal identity markers?

The Surpassing Greatness of Knowing Christ

Moses climbed Mount Sinai, and the cloud of God's glory settled on it. The rest of the Israelites had to stay below, but the Lord invited Moses to climb the mountain. Then he called to Moses from within the cloud, and Moses entered it. He stayed there 40 days (Exodus 24:15-18); Moses spent 40 days in the center of God's glory! I've often wondered what that must have been like.

Today God's glory is revealed in Christ (John 1:14, 2 Corinthians 4:6), and God is now calling all of us to climb the mountain. If you listen to your heart, you will hear the call. In your heart, you ache for intimacy — a heart-to-heart, soul-mate connection. That ache is nothing less than the voice of God calling you to climb the mountain. To climb this mountain, we'll need a guide, someone who knows the way, so the Apostle Paul will be our guide. His own story, in Philippians 3:7-11, will show us the way.

In verse 7, Paul writes one sentence that summarizes verses 7 through 11. Then in verse 8, he begins a sentence that continues through verse 11. Thus, the passage twice climbs the mountain of "knowing Christ." In these few verses, the person of Christ is mentioned, either by name or pronoun, no less than 11 times. The passage is about Christ. It tells us that knowing Christ is paramount. As we climb this mountain, we may find that we must discard some excess baggage, and then we'll arrive at a surprising base camp from which to begin our final assault.

Philippians 3:7-11:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul patterns verses 7 through 11 after his Christ poem in Philippians 2:6-11, even using several identical or nearly identical words: "consider," "found," "form"/"conformed" ("very nature"/"becoming like" in the NIV) and "death." Paul is showing that he did not consider his Jewish heritage as something to be used to his own advantage, just as Christ did not consider being equal with God as something to be exploited. Christ's life defined what it means to be equal with God. Paul's life defines what it means to be one of God's people. Paul patterns his life after Christ, making the same journey that he made, and he expects it to end the same way — with a resurrection. The message for the Philippians, many of whom were Roman citizens, would be that they should not consider their citizenship something to be exploited. The message for us is that we must be willing to surrender any advantages we have if they compete with allegiance to Christ.

Gains and losses

Paul uses the marketplace terms of "profit" and "loss" in verse 7 to compare his former values to his current values. He formerly valued his Jewish heritage and achievements, which from his perspective marked him out as a "righteous" man, or a member of God's covenant people (verses 1 through 6).

The verb translated "now consider" would be better translated "have considered." At some point, Paul decided that what he thought was profitable was better understood as loss. This decision was

“for the sake of Christ.” He must be talking about a decision after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9). He then understood that his Jewish heritage and achievements neither qualified him for covenant membership nor marked him out as a member. Something about Christ caused him to reconsider his outlook to the extent that what he formerly deemed profitable was deemed expendable. One might say that Paul “lost it” on the road to Damascus! He was traveling to Damascus to persecute followers of Jesus. His encounter with Christ changed the course of his life. From that point on, he traveled on a different road.

Your first encounter with Christ may not be as dramatic as Paul’s, but after you meet Jesus, you will realize that your values will have to change. Whatever our culture puts forth as its identity markers will have to be re-evaluated in light of Christ. In order to follow Jesus, you’ll have to set out on a different road — one that leads up a mountain.

Surpassing greatness of knowing Christ

In verse 8, Paul both further explains what he means in verse 7 and shifts from the past to the present. The present tense implies ongoing consideration. In the present, he considers “everything a loss.” For Paul, this “considering” is something he does repeatedly. The “loss” in view in verse 7 primarily concerned his Jewish heritage and achievements. Now he considers those advantages and every other potential advantage to be a loss. Again, such consideration is, literally, “for the sake of” Christ. What is it about Christ that causes this radical shift in values for Paul and continues to govern his choices? He says it is the “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” It’s not that nothing else holds any value; the value of knowing Christ is simply greater — so much greater that Paul can chalk up everything that would compete with “knowing Christ” as something that can be released.

What does it mean to know Christ? The word “know” was often used in the Hebrew Scriptures in connection with the Israelites’ relationship with the Lord (Exodus 10:2). In his covenant relationship with Israel, the Lord wanted the Israelites to know him. Part of his intention in making a new covenant was to open things up so that more people could know him (Jeremiah 31:4). The word “know” is used in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament of sexual relations (Genesis 4:1, Matthew 1:25). Both testaments compare the Lord’s covenant relationship with his people to marriage (Hosea 1-3, Ephesians 5:25-27, Revelation 19:7-8). God is romancing us. The closest human parallel is the physical, emotional and spiritual intimacy experienced in sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife, but even that pales in comparison to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. Here Paul calls Christ “my Lord” for the only time in his writings. Elsewhere, when using a personal possessive pronoun, he calls Christ “our Lord.” For Paul, an intimate personal relationship with Christ is in view here.

For the sake of Christ, particularly knowing Christ, Paul not only considers everything to be loss, he actually has lost all things. He has either acted on his “considering” by abandoning advantages or has had those advantages stripped from him because of his allegiance to Christ.

Moreover, he considers any such advantages “rubbish” — a vulgar term that could mean either excrement or garbage — in order that he may gain Christ. (The word translated “gain” is the verb connected to the noun translated “profit” in verse 7.) What he formerly considered or would otherwise consider “gain” he now considers loss and even rubbish in order that he may “gain” intimacy with Christ. Does that mean that Paul is looking forward to gaining Christ in the future? In a sense, yes. Verse 7 makes clear that he has already gained Christ, that he already knows him personally and intimately, but as the passage unfolds, there is clearly more to gain, particularly and finally at “the resurrection from the dead.”

Paul here pursues that which benefits him. If he suffers loss, it's only that he might gain something. Let us be clear and unapologetic that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are pursuing that which benefits us. We want to gain something. That which benefits us — that which we gain — is intimacy with our Lord. We are going to hear the passionate cries emanating from our hearts and interpret them as Jesus calling to us from that place. And we will meet with him there — in the center of our hearts, in the Holy of Holies where Jesus dwells. When we see the love in his face — the absolutely pure and holy love — we will know in our hearts that we were made for this meeting. The top of the mountain, then, ends up being the center of your heart. That's where the cloud of God's glory is resting. That's where Christ dwells. That's where he's waiting.

Think of how you feel when you're having a heart-to-heart conversation with someone you're close to, when you can't wait to hear what he says and you can't wait to share your thoughts, when the connections inspire memories, hope and laughter. When the conversation is over, you feel as if something has been released. That's what Christ wants with us, and that's what we want with Christ.

We will consider everything else loss and, yes, even garbage in comparison to knowing Christ. Nothing satisfies the heart like intimacy with Christ. For I am convinced that neither money nor possessions nor marriage nor sex nor health nor success nor recognition nor affirmation nor anything else one might consider valuable is able to be compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

Are you convinced of this? If you are, then, according to Paul, you must go on considering everything else that would compete for Christ's place in your heart as loss and garbage. Like Paul, you must add it up in your mind. Consider the gains and losses. What is of true and lasting worth, and what is not? What is worth the most?

You may have to give up some of what you value. Or it may be stripped from you. Either way, if in the loss you see the opportunity to gain intimacy with Christ, you win. Wouldn't it be nice to know that whenever you lose something you're actually gaining something, and that what you're gaining is of surpassing value? Wouldn't it be nice to look at the loss of every so-called "advantage" as an opportunity to draw closer to Christ?

Mary of Bethany possessed a pint of expensive perfume, but she thought nothing of pouring it on Jesus' feet as an expression of her love for him (John 12:2-3). She not only released a valuable possession, she did so eagerly, in order to embrace something much more valuable, the love of Christ, and express her love in return. So it goes with those of us who meet up with the love of Jesus. Possessions that were formerly highly valued slip easily through our fingers in order that we might possess something more valuable.

As you set out on the road that leads up the Mountain of Knowing Christ, you'll have to leave some baggage behind. Like Paul, you'll have to give up seeking your identity in cultural heritage and achievement. Then as you climb the mountain, you may find that you have some other bags to drop. If you know this in advance, then it will be easier to drop the unnecessary baggage when the time comes. They are probably weighing you down anyway. You don't need as much as you thought you did. Get rid of it and you'll travel lighter.

I have a very simple philosophy for long trips: Travel light. I pack less for a month-long trip than I do for a weekend trip. This enables me to move easily from place to place and see and do the things I want to without being encumbered by a large suitcase or two. The journey up the Mountain of Knowing Christ is long, and we don't want to be weighed down with the excess baggage of competing values.

In climbing a mountain, you not only need to shed excess baggage, you need a base camp from which to make an assault on the summit. The righteousness from God is such a base camp.

Righteousness for the sake of knowing Christ

Verses 9 and 10 offer a further explanation of what it means to gain Christ. To gain Christ means to be found in Christ — that is, to have a righteousness from God through faith in Christ — for the sake of knowing Christ. The one who finds Paul is God. God is looking for us. When he finds Paul, both now and in the future, he finds him in Christ. He finds that Paul is united with Christ, part of the messianic family. Paul therefore has a “righteousness.” This is a different place than the one in which he was formerly found.

“Righteousness” concerns status. It does not mean “goodness,” either innate or imputed; it means covenant membership. In this sense, when one is “righteous,” one belongs to God. Paul says he does not have a righteousness “of my own that comes from the law,” the kind of righteousness he supposed that he formerly possessed. That would be covenant membership based on Jewish heritage and expressed in Jewish observances and achievements. He considers that kind of covenant membership as “loss.” The covenant membership he now possesses does not come from the law (Jewish heritage) but through faith in Christ. When one has faith in Christ, one believes that Jesus is Lord. Instead of possessing a righteousness of his own (his own race), Paul, in view of such faith, possesses “the righteousness that comes from God.” God bestows upon the person with faith in Christ the gift of righteousness, or covenant membership.

Righteousness, however, is not the goal of Paul’s life. Neither is it the goal of this sentence. Verses 8 through 11 constitute one long sentence. The NIV begins a new sentence in verse 10, but the words translated “I want to know” constitute an article and an infinitive that would be literally translated “to know.” Similar constructions elsewhere convey purpose (Romans 6:6, Colossians 1:9-10, 1 Corinthians 10:13). Such is the case here. Paul wants the righteousness of God *so that* he may know Christ. For Paul, covenant membership is not an end; it is a means to an end. The end is “to know” Christ.

The sentence in verses 8 through 10 builds to two crescendos in explaining the reason for Paul’s “gain” and “loss” mentality. The first is in verse 8, where everything is considered a loss for the sake of knowing Christ. The second is in verse 10, where righteousness is desired for the sake of knowing Christ. The goal of Paul’s sentence, and the goal of his life, is to know Christ.

It’s important that we understand the “righteousness from God.” First we must realize that this righteousness is the status of covenant membership conferred upon the people of God. Second, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that it has anything to do with heritage and achievements. Third, we must realize that such status is conferred on the basis of faith in Christ. Fourth, we must realize that the righteousness from God is not an end but a means to an end. Our goal is not to “get” righteousness or even to be righteous, however we might define those terms. Our goal, having been found by God in Christ, is to use the righteousness we already have as a platform to know Christ.

In the mountain-climbing analogy, the righteousness from God is the base camp from which we make our final assault on the summit. Some of us who believe in Christ are looking around for a base camp without knowing we’ve already arrived at it. We’re trying to find righteousness when God has already found us in Christ with the righteousness from God. We set out from the base camp in search of another base camp! We try to be righteous or conform to some standard or achieve something that might earn us the right status. We have the wrong goal. We already possess the righteousness we

need. The goal is intimacy with Christ. This is why you've come this far. Make your assault. The great privilege in being one of God's righteous ones is that we get to know Christ. Enjoy the privilege.

Paul has some ideas about how one might go about pursuing intimacy with Christ.

Power of resurrection and fellowship of sufferings

For Paul, knowing Christ means knowing "the power of his resurrection and fellowship of sharing in his sufferings." Suffering and resurrection were the dominant themes of the life of Jesus. If you want to know someone, you want to know the story of that person's life. If we asked for the story of Christ's life, we'd hear about his sufferings and his resurrection. At the first level, then, knowing the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings means connecting with the story of Christ at a deep level. Paul not only wants to know about these things, he wants to experience them. He wants not only to know about the story of Christ, he wants to live the story of Christ.

Christ came to live the life marked out for humanity by God. In his story we hear echoes of the stories of Moses, Abraham, David and others. Mostly we hear echoes from the stories of Adam, the first human, and Israel, the human community. Christ fulfills the Adamic and Israelite call and invites us to make his story our story and thus to know him.

What does it mean to experience the power of Christ's resurrection? It means to experience the risen Lord Jesus through his Holy Spirit, who empowers us by enlightening us, motivating us, leading us and enabling us. In many ways, the process of experiencing Christ's resurrection means being empowered to experience the sufferings of Christ. This may be why Paul lists knowing the power of Christ's resurrection before knowing the fellowship of his sufferings, even though Christ's sufferings preceded his resurrection. Knowing the power of his resurrection enables us to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. Paul may also reverse the order because experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection seems infinitely more desirable than experiencing his sufferings. The order sets us up for the surprise: that Paul actually desires to experience the sufferings of Christ, and that we should desire to do the same.

What does it mean to experience the sufferings of Christ? Christ loved the world so much that he suffered for it. The sufferings of the world *are* the sufferings of Christ. The risen Lord Jesus, just after meeting Paul on the road to Damascus, spoke to Ananias regarding Paul: "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15). Earlier in this letter, Paul told the Philippians, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29). As Paul obeyed Jesus in bringing the gospel to the world, he suffered for the name of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:21-29). Like Christ, Paul loved the world so much that he suffered for it. To experience the sufferings of Christ is to love Christ and, therefore, the people in the world so much that we suffer for them. It is to share and bear the pain of others, seeking to introduce them by word, deed and prayer to the love of Christ.

If you want to know someone, you'll want to know what that person cares about most. In the case of Jesus, he cares most about a world full of people in pain. When he saw suffering, he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," and he wept (John 11:33-35). Because he cared for the world, he was "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3). If we want to know Jesus, we must connect with the sorrow and suffering of the world and resolve to bring the love of Christ to it. He gives us his Holy Spirit to help us do so. This is how we experience the sufferings of Jesus. This is also how we know him at the deepest level. Knowing Christ is of such value that the suffering that brings us closer to him is not only to be tolerated but also *desired*.

Experiencing the power and suffering of Christ is how Paul is, literally, “conformed to his death.” In obedience to the Father and out of love for the world, Christ suffered and died for the world. Being conformed to his death, then, means to suffer for others out of love for them and in obedience to the Father. Our lives then begin to take the shape, or the “form,” of Christ’s life. We are thus being conformed to his death. In being conformed to his death, we know him.

Learn the story of Christ. In learning the story, connect with Christ. But don’t stop there. Don’t just know the story. Live the story! Enter the world, seeking to share the love of Christ. You’ll find that to do so you’ll need the Holy Spirit, who is with you to reveal Christ to you and to the world. He will motivate you and empower you and open closed doors. As you move from your little world into God’s big world, you’ll find that, as the Spirit works in you, your love for people will grow; you’ll find that you care more than you thought you cared. You’ll come in contact with suffering, and you’ll shy away from it less and enter it more. You’ll find your heart breaking for a broken world. When your heart breaks for those in pain and you feel almost as if you yourself are suffering or even wish you could suffer in their place, you are very close to the heart of Christ. You are being conformed to his death. And you are knowing him like you never have before. In living the story, you have the opportunity to know — really know — Christ. As Jean Valjean sings in the musical *Les Misérables*, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”²²

Is this serving Christ or knowing Christ? It’s both. We tend to separate “doing” and “being,” but Christ can be known in both the being and the doing. In fact, intimacy with Christ is incomplete if either contemplation or action is jettisoned. Contemplation and action are mutually reinforcing; each motivates the other. Thinking about Christ causes us to take action. Taking action causes us to think about Christ. The contemplative life and the active life join forces in knowing Christ. I tend to be a more contemplative person — more of a thinker than a doer. We all have our God-given proclivities. Yet as I shared earlier in our study of Philippians (Philippians 2:19-30), my relationship with Christ deepened when I started “doing.”

Look for Christ everywhere, in your “being” and in your “doing.” Find him in the scriptures. Find him in your prayers. Find him in your passions. Find him in your dreams. Find him in your fears. Find him when feelings of melancholy overtake your heart. Find him when a memory produces a wistful sigh. Find him in your deep desires for sexual intimacy. Find him on the mountains and in the valleys, in the rivers and in the deserts. Find him in the crash of a wave and in the cry of an eagle. Find him in the stunning colors and subtle hues of a sunrise or a sunset. Find him in the way droplets of dew capture the sunlight. Find him at the first instant you notice a change in seasons. Find him in Michelangelo and find him in Frank Lloyd Wright. Find him in Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Emily Dickinson and John Grisham. Find him in Mozart, and find him in U2. Find him in *Casablanca* and find him in *The Matrix*. Find him in the intricacy of a computer chip and the vastness of the Golden Gate Bridge. Find him in the smile of a child and the tears of an orphan. Find him in the glow of a bride and the despair of the homeless. Find him in the joy of a grandfather and the sadness of a widow. Find him in the living, and find him in the dying. Find him with your eyes, your ears, your nose, your hands and your imagination. Let what you take in stir your heart and carry you to Christ.

How do you know Christ? Anyway you can! Find him here. Find him now. Climb the mountain. Make your assault.

Attaining to the resurrection from the dead

Knowing Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering conforms Paul to the death of Christ and enables him “somehow” to “attain to the resurrection of the dead.” Paul

writes later, in Philippians 3:21, that in the resurrection, Christ will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” God will vindicate followers of Jesus as his covenant people by raising them from the dead. The word “somehow” does not mean that Paul doubts whether he will be there on that day (although it may mean that Paul is entertaining the thought that Christ may return before his death, in which case he would be transformed but not resurrected). Paul’s wording conveys humility in the face of the power of God — an acknowledged inability to understand how anyone could be raised from the dead.

For Paul, what’s so great about being resurrected from the dead? He writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: “And so we will be with the Lord forever.” If in the passage in Philippians he were to climb the Mountain of Knowing Christ one more time, this is what he would say. Being resurrected from the dead means first and foremost that we will know Christ fully and forever, just as we have been known by him (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The fragrance of desire

This is our holy privilege and duty: to pursue intimacy with Christ with all that is within us. If a collection of us made knowing Christ our highest ambition, I shudder to think what it would mean for the advance of the gospel. When Mary poured the perfume on the feet of Jesus, the house was filled with its fragrance. May we let go of whatever it is we need to let go of, and may the fragrance of our desire for Christ fill the world.

Questions

1. How has your connection with Jesus Christ caused a shift in values for you?
2. If you have in particular identified a desire to connect with Jesus Christ, describe this experience.
3. Can you identify anything that God may be asking you to release because it’s drawing your affections away from Jesus Christ? If so, what is it?
4. How do you think your life would change if you considered every loss you suffered an opportunity to gain Christ?
5. How might you pursue intimacy with Christ?
- 6 How might you, by the Holy Spirit, go about “living the story of Christ”?

Hooked in the Heart

The main character in David James Duncan's novel *The River Why* has a visionary experience near the end of the book. Gus Orviston has just hooked a huge salmon on very light fishing line. He wants to play the fish, not land it. And play it he does, following the salmon up the river for seven miles. Along the way, he develops a deep affinity for the salmon. At the end he places his face in the water, coming face to face with the fish. He cradles the salmon in his hand and gently releases it. By this time, it's the middle of the night. We pick up the story, as narrated by Gus:

I found myself on a rise about seven miles upstream from my cabin. The road was empty. I walked a long way, watching the moon expand and redden and sink. For a while as I walked I tried to think about what had happened, but I was too tired, too wet and cold.

The sky began to grow light in the east behind me. I just walked and watched. Mist clung to the river as sunlight crept over the Coast Range. The road was white with frost: it shone like a strip of moon surface in the early light, running from east to west like the horizontal bar of a cross. The entire valley hovered, still, before me. Somewhere a raven called ...

And then I felt it — a sharp pain in the heart, like a hook being set. I whirled around: sunlight struck me full in the face. My eyes closed.

And then I saw it — the vertical bar — a line so subtle it must be made of nothing nameable. And it ran from my heart of earth and blood through my head, to the sky; ran like a beam of watery light; ran from the changing, flowing forms of world to a realm that light alone could enter. But my pain grew sharper: mad with joy, I sank to my knees on the white road, and I felt the hand, resting like sunlight on my head. And I knew that the line of light led not to a realm but to a Being, and that the light and the hook were his, and that they were made of love alone. My heart was pierced. I began to weep. I felt the Ancient One drawing me toward him, coaxing me out of this autumn landscape, beckoning me on toward undying joy.

The hand was lifted. The nameless presence faded, and the light around me blended with the sunlight I knew. But in my heart the wound stayed, and the good hurt. I rose from the road, brushed off my knees, wiped my eyes and drew breath. Then I walked — though I knew that from this point on the road, and from this point in my soul, there was no escape, nowhere to go.²³

Gus's vision relates to what he's just experienced. Only this time, he's the salmon, and God has hooked him. In this scene, the "Ancient One" paints a cross with the horizontal bar of mist and the vertical line of light. Christ hooks us with his love. He draws us toward him, coaxing us out of whatever landscape we're dwelling in, beckoning us on toward undying joy. Many of us have felt this hook. We have seen where the line leads. We have felt the hand of the Ancient One. For us, there is no going back, only forward. We must press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of us. We press on that we might know Christ fully. Yet sometimes, we get complacent. It is for us that Philippians 3:12-16 was written.

Philippians 3:12-16:

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Pressing on to win the prize

Paul here may be speaking against pagan religions that offer perfection now without suffering. Also, there was some confusion in the early church concerning the presence of the kingdom of God. The fact that it had been inaugurated but not consummated took some explaining. Some people confused inauguration with consummation. Paul realizes that his story in verses 4 through 11 could be open to misinterpretation. So he says he has not “obtained all this,” which he further qualifies as being “made perfect.” He has not arrived at the final goal of knowing Christ fully, which will be realized when he is resurrected from the dead.

Instead of being satisfied with his current relationship with Christ, Paul says, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” The word translated “press on,” used here as part of a race analogy, can also be translated “pursue” or “persecute.” In fact, Paul said earlier in Philippians 3 that he was at one time a “persecutor” of the church. While Paul was pursuing followers of Jesus, Jesus was pursuing him. When Jesus took hold of Paul, he said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). Now that Christ Jesus has taken hold of him, Paul is pursuing something different. For what has Christ taken hold of him? For the “prize” Paul talks about in verse 14, which is full knowledge of Christ, which he will not attain until the resurrection. Christ has taken hold of Paul that Paul might one day fully take hold of Christ. Christ has placed in Paul’s heart partial knowledge and the hope of full knowledge. In this way, he pulls Paul along. Paul responds by pressing on.

In light of this, Paul says in verse 13 that there is one thing he doesn’t do and one thing he does do. He doesn’t consider himself as having taken hold of full knowledge of Christ. He does forget what is behind and strain forward to what is ahead.

Paul, both by heritage and achievement, was an elite Jew (verses 4 through 6). Before meeting Christ, he considered, literally, these “things” valuable (verse 7). Now Paul wants to forget, literally, these “things” (verse 13). Earlier, they gave him a sense of identity. He can remember such achievements with some feelings of pride. In another sense, now that he has come to Christ, he can remember such achievements with guilt, especially inasmuch as persecution of the church was one of his “achievements” (verse 6). Perhaps at different times, his past achievements may attract him because of pride or burden him because of guilt. Either way, whether they are attractive or burdensome, Paul forgets them. Instead, he applies his mental energies to “straining toward” what is ahead — full apprehension of Christ. In the race, he doesn’t look back, only forward.

In verse 14, Paul explains what motivates him in this race, once again using the verb translated “press on.” In the games, the “goal” was the marker at the finish line. The prize, a palm branch, was given by the president of the games, who summoned the victor at the conclusion of the race. The prize for Paul is, literally, the “heavenward calling of God in Christ Jesus.” After his death, Paul expects to be summoned by God himself, as revealed in Christ Jesus. There may be some other equivalent to the palm branch, something like hearing God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23), but Paul doesn’t elaborate. For him, the prize is simply being in the presence of Christ.

The soul's paradox of love

This passage tells us that we haven't arrived. Yet sometimes we think and act as if we've come to some kind of spiritual living room where we can kick back and relax. We've settled into a couch from which our spiritual lives can almost be run automatically. We program our spiritual lives like we program our recording devices — and with just about as much passion. We push a few buttons to keep things going, but that's about it. If we've settled into such a mode, we've deadened our appetite for Christ.

A mark of someone who is a follower of Jesus is that he or she is *not* satisfied. Having tasted of Christ, he wants more of Christ. And he will not rest until he rests in the eternal presence of Christ. He will not stop running until he wins the prize. A.W. Tozer says, "To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul's paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too-easily-satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart."²⁴

But if one day we will know Christ fully, why do we need to pursue him now? If such a question is seriously entertained, one might have cause to question whether he knows Christ in the first place. If we take it easy now, what does that say about our desire for Christ? Perhaps that we don't desire Christ at all. The evidence that you have Christ is that you want more of him. If you don't want more of him, the time has come for you to meet with God and talk this over with him.

Christ takes hold of us that we might pursue him. On the one hand, we can expect to always sense a sort of holy dissatisfaction with life that causes us to want something more. On the other hand, Christ has seized our hearts that we might seek that "something more" in him. In some sense, do you feel dissatisfied? Does it feel as if something has seized your heart and won't let you go? Christ Jesus is calling you to run for the prize of knowing him fully and eternally.

If you feel impeded in the race of knowing Christ, something from your past may be slowing you down. Past achievements may cause you to reside in the glory days of yore instead of pressing on to the glory days of Christ. You may long for a past where the lines were easier to draw and indulgence was easier to justify. Or the failures or sins of the past may haunt you. Dwelling in the past can make you smug because of achievements; wistful because of predictability, innocence and indulgence; or hopeless because of failure and guilt. In these ways, the past can hold us back.

The past should be remembered, but not in these ways. We visit the past to remember the great things God has done for us so that we might live in the present and press on toward the future. The trophies will rust. Predictability, innocence and indulgence are illusory companions. Past failures, if reversed, would bring you only fleeting glory, and the sins of the past have been washed away by the blood of Christ. Let go of the past, and get back in the race. "Don't look back," said Satchel Paige, the old baseball pitcher. "Something might be gaining on you."

We must turn from the past and lean in to the future, for that's where Christ waits, at the end of the race. That's when he will call us heavenward, and that's when we will rise to meet him, and that's when the King will rise to give us the prize of himself. Even now, we can hear the call in our hearts and picture the scene with our imaginations. Such a call and such a picture pull us ceaselessly forward

What 'mature' people do

The word translated "mature" in verse 15 is the adjective that stems from the verb translated "made perfect" in verse 12. Paul has just said that he has not been made perfect, or mature. Yet now he says what all of those who are perfect, or mature, should do. He must be using irony. No one is perfected in this life, although pagan influences and confusion regarding the inauguration and consummation

of the kingdom of God may lead the Philippians to think they've been perfected — that in some sense they have arrived. The view that such “perfect” or “mature” people should take is the one Paul has just been advocating: pressing on toward full knowledge of Christ. Paul is saying, “Well if you've arrived, the view you should take is that you haven't arrived.” One is in some sense “mature” when she recognizes that she's *not* fully mature and therefore presses on toward full maturity, which is full knowledge of Christ.

Paul allows that the Philippians may have a different view of life than the one he's been depicting in Philippians 3. In fact, he must be instructing them because different views were pervasive. He has told them the truth, in general terms, but he trusts God to give them the specific understanding they need.

However, Paul says there is something for which they don't need to wait on God: “what we have already attained.” Precisely what Paul means by this phrase is difficult to determine. Perhaps what has been attained is revelation from God, as elucidated in Philippians 3, that both Paul and the Philippians have apprehended. If this is the case, Paul is telling the Philippians to live based on the understanding God has given them of the truths revealed in Paul's narrative.

Adventure in faith

If we think we've arrived at a comfortable spiritual destination, here's what we need to do: leave. That's what “mature” people do. They're not satisfied. They press on. They want more of Christ. If we think we've arrived, it probably means that we've got just enough of Jesus to satisfy some spiritual “responsibility” but not so much of him that he threatens the way we live.

Paul, through the narrative of his own life, instructs us but allows that it is God who gives understanding. He says to Timothy, “Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (2 Timothy 2:7). All the biblical writers instruct us, of course. Some of the instruction confuses us, and we wonder how it applies to our lives. We must apply our minds when we read and study and listen to the word. No matter how much we learn, we will never learn as much as we'd like to learn. We want to learn more. So we press on. As we press on, God gives us insight when we need it, but we don't receive it all at once. God reveals it to us bits and pieces. He gives us what we need when we need it.

Many of us think that there is some crucial key to life we're not grasping. We think this because we're dissatisfied. Of course, we're supposed to be dissatisfied so that we might press on to know Christ more fully. Nevertheless, we think there must be some magic key out there somewhere that opens the door to satisfaction. Others seem to be satisfied, so the key must be out there. Maybe there isn't one big key. Maybe there are a whole bunch of little keys that God places in our paths that allow us to open the series of doors we confront in life. God shows us a key, we open a door and we continue on our journey, moving closer to Christ. Then he shows us another key, and so on.

Seen from this point of view, life is an adventure to be enjoyed instead of a puzzle to be solved. Once you've seen God show you a few of these keys, you pick up on this approach to life. A closed door becomes not so much reason for despair but reason for waiting expectantly on the Lord. If you don't understand something, wait on God. If you need to know it, he'll reveal it to you at the right time.

The keys that God has given us add up to “what we've already attained.” We must “live up to,” or live on the basis of, this insight. This collection of keys represents the history of God's faithfulness and helps us to develop an outlook that sees life as an adventure in faith.

The rest of the story

In *The River Why*, God hooks Gus near the end of the book. When the book ends, Gus is still a young man. We are left to imagine how the rest of his story might turn out. How about the rest of your story? Christ is beckoning you on toward the undying joy of appearing before him at the end of the story. What will you do now, with a hook in your heart and dissatisfaction in your soul?

Questions

1. Do you think in any sense that you have grown complacent in life? If so, describe this experience.
2. How might you use any dissatisfaction in life as a motivation to pursue Christ?
3. Do you think something from your past may be holding you back in life? If so, describe this experience.
4. How do you think the Lord may be calling you to move forward in life?
5. How do you respond to this statement: “Life is an adventure to be enjoyed rather than a puzzle to be solved”?

Heaven's Pattern for Earthly Living

In popular thought, heaven and earth have little to do with each other. Heaven is some place your soul goes after you die. Until then, heaven means very little. Even then, heaven doesn't seem to be much to look forward to. For now, God may be looking down from heaven. Every once in a while he may answer a prayer or two. But for the most part, he's removed from earthly life.

The scriptures tell a different story. The Apostle Paul says that heaven has established an outpost on earth. Together, those of us who follow Jesus constitute a colony of heaven commissioned by God to spread the influence of heaven. As members of this colony, our citizenship is in heaven. One day, heaven will rule earth. God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Knowing these things, we live according to the laws of heaven, not earth. The pattern that heaven gives us for earthly living is that of self-giving love.

Paul's story in Philippians 3:4-14 features passion for knowing Christ and willingness to relinquish power, status and privileges for the sake of knowing and following Jesus. He follows the heavenly pattern, and in verses 17 through 21, he offers it to us.

Philippians 3:17-21:

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Good and bad patterns

Paul has just told the story of his life so that his readers might follow his example. The story shows how Paul was willing to abandon his privileges as an elite Jew for the sake of Christ. The "pattern" that Paul gave the Philippians and that others exemplify is that of self-giving love. In this letter, the pattern is seen in Paul (1:12-26, 3:4-14), Timothy (2:19-24), Epaphroditus (2:25-30) and, most significantly, Christ (2:6-11). Many of those living in Philippi, a Roman colony, had the privilege of Roman citizenship. Where Christ and Caesar vie for the affections of one's heart, no question must remain as to who wins the battle. If the privileges provided by Caesar cause one to distance oneself from Christ and the self-giving love that he calls for, such privileges must be set aside.

Paul's pattern is not the only one, however. Just as some "live" according to Paul's pattern (verse 17), many "live" according to a different pattern (verse 18). So Paul warns the Philippians about these people and their way of life, lest the believers imitate them instead of him.

The identity of these "enemies of the cross of Christ" is the subject of much debate in scholarly circles. They may be unbelieving Jews, inasmuch as Paul tells his readers about them "with tears." Elsewhere Paul speaks about unbelieving Jews in similar language, saying, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" for them (Romans 9:2). Paul describes these people in five ways:

- They are "enemies of the cross of Christ."

- Their “destiny is destruction.”
- Their “god is their stomach.”
- Their “glory is in their shame.”
- Their “mind is on earthly things.”

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that the preaching of Christ crucified is a “stumbling block to Jews.” Most Jews, of course, were not only enemies of the cross of Christ; they were enemies of all crosses. Crucifixion was a form of execution that Rome employed to keep its subjects, such as the Jews, in line. For the Jews, the last place their messiah would be found was hanging on a Roman cross. Jesus, as a would-be messiah, did not endorse the nationalist agenda of Israel and called it to account for abandoning its God. The Jewish leaders perceived him to be a threat and handed him over to the Romans, who crucified him. As enemies of the cross of Christ, they would not have endorsed the pattern of self-abandonment that Paul was advocating. On the contrary, they would have been grasping for status, power and privileges.

Paul earlier indicated that the pagans who oppose the Philippian believers “will be destroyed” (Philippians 1:28). Here he also speaks of the “destruction” that unbelievers are destined for, in this case perhaps unbelieving Jews. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul describes “everlasting destruction” as being “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” Why would enemies of the cross of Christ want to spend eternity in his presence?

The phrase “their God is their stomach” may be a reference to the Jewish food laws that supposedly helped mark out the Jews as God’s people. Many Jews used the food laws as a way to distinguish themselves from the Gentiles and as a way to keep the Gentiles, who didn’t receive or follow such laws, from accessing God. They had elevated the food laws to such an extent that here they are seen as worshipping their stomachs instead of God (Colossians 2:16, 20-21, 23; Hebrews 9:10; Mark 7:1-16). Grammatically, the next phrase, “their glory is in their shame,” is linked to the previous phrase. These people who worship their stomach “glory,” or delight in, such worship, but Paul says it is actually to their shame and that they should be satisfied with it.

If these people are Jews, the earthly things they set their minds on would concern circumcision, food laws and Sabbath keeping. Such laws were given as symbols of heavenly realities, but many people gutted them of their meaning and clung to their forms as a way of self-preservation and as a way to persuade God to take action.

Lest we accuse Paul of being anti-Jewish, we must of course remember that he himself was a Jew and that he anguished over the unrepentant state of his countrymen. He even said, “For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel” (Romans 9:3).

If this is a polemic against Jews who are enemies of Christ, what is it doing here, in Paul’s letter to the Philippians? Paul has already described some Jews in pagan terms (Philippians 3:2-3). It’s likely that his warning throughout Philippians 3 is against the lure of both Judaism and paganism, with the latter probably being the more significant concern. The particular pagan feature that Paul seems most preoccupied with is the Caesar cult of the Roman empire. The attraction of following Caesar instead of Christ was a strong one in the Roman colony of Philippi.

The importance of examples

Here again in this letter we see that “patterns” are important for us. We not only need instruction in how to live, we also need to see what following such instruction looks like in a life. Here the pattern

is abandoning privileges when they conflict with knowing and following Christ. In Philippians, we see the pattern in Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Their stories are inspiring. We could benefit from being on the lookout for figures in history who followed the pattern. Biographies are a good source. Also, we need to take note of those who are following the pattern today. They serve as living examples. If we have the opportunity to seek these people out, to talk with them and get to know them, so much the better.

We need to take note of those who are following this pattern because the pattern that our culture gives us, and that most are following, is one of self-preservation and self-exaltation. Those who follow the cultural pattern are enemies of the cross of Christ in that they oppose self-abandonment and promote self-exaltation. Although those who follow such a pattern may be living it up, their destiny, if the pattern doesn't change, is destruction. We need to remember this, lest we conform our lives to their pattern. Their god is their stomach; they have their own set of laws in order to distinguish themselves from others and keep others from reaching their heights or breaking into their club. The exclusivity they revel in is actually to their shame. Their minds are thus set on earthly things; they rejoice in and protect earthly status, power and privileges.

This pattern is all around us — in the people we work with, in the television shows we watch and in the web sites we visit. The pattern almost seems to seep into our thinking through the air we breathe. We need to see the pattern of self-exaltation and self-preservation for what it is — an enemy of the cross of Christ. And we need to breathe in the biblical pattern that abandons privileges for the sake of knowing and following Christ.

One of my living examples is Chrissy Tsai, who is a PBC missionary to East Asia. I read her monthly updates and I see a woman who above all else wants to know Christ but is honest about the performance issues that get in her way. Here's someone I can identify with. She has given up much in this country to follow Jesus to another country and share him with those who don't know him. Here's someone who inspires me. She's following the Christ pattern.

Colony of heaven

Verse 20 begins with a word that is usually translated “for,” not “but.” In verses 20 and 21 Paul is explaining why his readers should follow his example. They should do so — they can do so — because they know what will happen at the end of the story. The Christ pattern of love will one day be the law of the land, so they can live now in the light of that day.

In contrast to those whose minds are on earthly things, Paul indicates that believers' citizenship is in heaven. Believers, therefore, should set their mind on the heavenly things that pertain to their citizenship. Some of the readers of Paul's letter would have been citizens of Rome. Even if the Philippians have Roman citizenship, their more significant citizenship is in heaven. A colony was established to secure a conquered country by permeating it with Roman culture. If the natives threatened the colony, Caesar, who was called “savior” and “lord,” would come to rescue and liberate his people.

Paul is saying that the Philippian believers, as citizens of heaven, are called to spread the influence of heaven in their city. Their Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, will one day come to finish the job and liberate them. Rome will try to set their minds on earthly things, but the believers must hold to their citizenship in heaven and its calling.

When Christ does come to save the citizens of heaven at the end of the age, he will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” Our bodies are “lowly” now in that they are subject to temptation, sin, illness, frailty, death and decay.

Christ's body was transformed when he was resurrected. He still had a human body, but it was a different kind of human body. This may partially explain why his followers didn't recognize him after he was resurrected (Luke 24:16, John 20:15). It also may explain how he was able to appear in a room with locked doors (John 20:19, 26). The word "glory" pertains to Christ's exaltation and sovereignty. Caesar had a certain "glory," but it will be shown to be pitiful and transient in light of the glory of Christ.

David, in writing to God in Psalm 8:4-8, speaks of "man" in this way:

*You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
And crowned him with glory and honor
You made him rule over the works of your hands;
You put everything under his feet:
All flocks and herds,
And the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air and the fish of the sea,
All that swim the paths of the seas.*

God intended humanity to be sovereign, to rule over his creation. The New Testament says Psalm 8 is fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 2:6-8, Ephesians 1:22). He becomes the new Adam, the truly human one.

The bodies of believers, once they are transformed, will be like the body of Christ. These will be physical bodies, somewhat like the bodies we have now, but completely suited to, and animated by, the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). And these bodies will enable us to fulfill God's intention for us to rule over his creation — only it will be a new creation that will have undergone its own transformation (Romans 8:20-21). The new creation will be filled with the glory of God — his presence and majesty (Habakkuk 2:14, Revelation 22:23).

The transformation of our bodies will take place by the "power" that enables Christ to "bring everything under his control." The power that Christ has is that of the one true King. He will use that power, as our Savior and Lord, to transform our bodies. Not only will he transform our bodies, he will also bring everything under his control, including Caesar and all other powers who oppose him and oppress his people (1 Corinthians 15:27-28).

In verses 20 and 21, Paul picks up several strands from his poem about Christ in Philippians 2:6-11, which spoke of the incarnation and exaltation of Christ.²⁵ He does so to show us that the exaltation of Christ means that we, too, will be exalted and that we must take the same lowly road that Christ took.

The third alternative

As members of the church of Jesus Christ, we have been sent by our Lord and Savior to form a colonial outpost from which we spread the influence of heaven. The church has often opted for one of two extremes. We have withdrawn from the world in order to avoid being stained by it. Or we have entered the world in order to dominate. Withdraw or dominate: Both inclinations have their basis in fear. When we withdraw, we fear contamination. When we dominate, we fear annihilation.

The scriptures offer us a third alternative. We gather together to adopt and reinforce the Christ pattern of self-abandonment. Then we enter the world and influence it through this pattern — through the power of love rather than the love of power. This third alternative will always contain some tension. We will often wonder if we're falling off the side of withdrawal or domination, and we will feel pulled in both directions. Isolation and power each have their appeal. We will have to

think and pray and use all the wisdom that God gives us in order to take the third path, but it is the path to which we are called.

When we withdraw, we lose whatever influence we might have. When we dominate, opting for the power of love rather than the love of power, we model the pattern of the culture instead of the pattern of Christ, and, again, we lose our influence.

Levi the tax collector was an outcast. Jews considered him a turncoat for collecting taxes for the Romans. Jesus, however, went to Levi's house and had dinner with many other tax collectors and sinners there. The scribes and Pharisees were aghast. Jesus was spreading the influence of heaven at a party of sinners — but without being influenced by them (Mark 2:13-17). We should consider attending such parties. If they won't come to our parties, we need to go to theirs. When Jesus entered the world of sinners, he was not contaminated by their sin. Rather, his holiness cleansed their sin (Mark 5:25-34). Jesus resides with us by his Spirit. He has made us holy (Ephesians 1:4). We too can venture forth into the world as a sanctifying influence.

N.T. Wright comments:

We need people who will hold on to Christ firmly with one hand and reach out the other, with wit and skill and cheerfulness, with compassion and sorrow and tenderness, to the places where our world is in pain. We need people who will use all their God-given skills, as Paul used his, to analyze where things have gone wrong, to come to the place of pain, and to hold over the wound the only medicine which will really heal, which is the love of Christ made incarnate once more, the strange love of God turned into your flesh and mine, your smile and mine, your tears and mine, your patient analysis and mine, your frustration and mine, your joy and mine.²⁴

We can seek to influence the world through the power of love, and risk rejection, because we know that our Lord and Savior will come from heaven to finish the work. When he does, love will reign. The Christ pattern of love will be the law of the land. We are not waiting to go to heaven. We are waiting for heaven to come to earth. When our Savior comes to earth, he will transform God's creation and our bodies, and we will reign with Christ over this new creation. The scent of heavenly influence will be everywhere. Our minds and bodies will be perfectly suited for this new creation and this calling. Our bodies will be able to carry out the desires of our hearts, which will be perfectly in line with God's will. Our wills will conform to his, and we will delight in this alignment. We will be what God always intended us to be. We will be what we've always wanted to be. We will be the lords of the earth. And everything that is now out of control will be brought under the control of Christ.

Salt of the earth

"You are the salt of the earth," Jesus said. "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men" (Matthew 5:13). Salt was used as a preservative. Jesus was telling his followers that they are supposed to influence life on earth. To say "you are the salt of the earth" is another way of saying "our citizenship is in heaven." We are the salt of the earth and the colony of heaven, sent by God to influence the earth through the heavenly pattern of self-giving love.

Questions

1. Think of someone who you think exemplifies the life of faith. What characterizes that person?

2. What steps might you take to getting closer to someone who exemplifies the life of faith to which you aspire?
3. How do you think you are influenced by the cultural pattern of self-exaltation?
4. How might you go about resisting the influence of this pattern and instead opt for the pattern of self-abandonment?
5. How might you spread the influence of heaven through the Christ pattern of self-abandonment?

Conflict, Anxiety and Culture

We face three problems on a regular basis: conflict with others, personal anxiety and cultural influences. How do we resolve conflicts? How do we deal with anxiety? How do we live in a culture that isn't favorably disposed to the gospel? The Apostle Paul has answers to all three questions in Philippians 4:1-9.

Verse 1 looks back to the whole of Philippians 3 and offers a summarizing application. Then Paul closes his letter, as his custom, with practical application and personal matters. Verses 2 through 9 begin this "practical" section and feature a treasure trove of wisdom.

Philippians 4:1:

Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

In verse 1, Paul uses wording that looks back to Philippians 3 in exhorting his readers to "stand firm in the Lord." The word translated "stand firm" was used of soldiers who stood their ground in battle. Paul also used the word in Philippians 1:27, when he urged his readers to "stand firm in one spirit." There, he appealed to unity. Here, the appeal to unity is embedded in the exhortation to stand firm by adopting the pattern modeled by Paul in Philippians 3 — that of knowing Jesus and waiting for his return while practicing self-giving love. Such a pattern, if adopted by individuals, strengthens the community of which they are part. Paul also bases his appeal on his strong feelings for them. Paul envisions the Philippians as being his victor's "crown" at the end of the "games," when Christ returns (Philippians 2:16, 1 Thessalonians 2:19). This appeal comes to the Philippians from one who knows them, loves them and wants the best for them. Such an appeal is likely to be welcomed.

Resolving conflicts

Philippians 4:2-3:

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

In verse 2, Paul applies his exhortations concerning advancing the gospel, unity and self-giving love to the relationship between two women in Philippi: Euodia and Syntyche. Paul says nothing about the nature of their disagreement, because it would have been apparent to those concerned. His exhortation to these two women is that they, literally, "think the same in the Lord." Paul employed similar wording in Philippians 2:2 and 5 in the context of advocating unity based on humility for the sake of advancing the gospel. The way forward for Euodia and Syntyche is to raise their eyes from their agendas to the agenda of the gospel. They should "think" like Christ (Philippians 2:5) and like Paul (Philippians 3:15). All agendas must be subordinated to the gospel.

Just as we don't know the nature of the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche, neither do we know the identity of the "yokefellow," although it would have been apparent to the Philippians. Paul encourages this person, Clement and even the entire believing community in Philippi to help

these women resolve their conflict. Paul doesn't say how they should help them, but no doubt such aid would include helping them understand the importance of the gospel. The conflict is by no means unresolvable, for the two women have contended at Paul's side for the advance of the gospel. The word translated "contended" was a word used for gladiators who suffer. These women have found the gospel worthy enough to fight and suffer for. Perhaps all they need is a reminder.

Here's an approach to conflict resolution that we seldom, if ever, think of. It is to "think the gospel." It is to understand the importance of the gospel — the good news that Jesus is Lord — and to subordinate our agenda to it. It is to ask, in the middle of a conflict with someone else, "How can I respond in a way that best serves the interests of the gospel?" If we sincerely asked that question, we'd get along a little better, and followers of Jesus — and therefore the gospel — would have a better reputation.

In the gospel, we have something that's bigger and more important than our conflicts. To think the gospel is to be lifted by the gospel above the conflict and to see it in a different, more objective light. To resolve conflicts in such a way presupposes that those involved assign significance to the gospel. To begin with, then, we need to be a community that fosters belief in the importance of the gospel. From Paul's perspective, conflict resolution is a community proposition. He not only exhorts the two people to think the gospel, he also exhorts others to help them think the gospel. We are a community that helps each other think the gospel. That prevents some conflicts from happening in the first place and then provides an environment for placing conflicts in their proper light.

Channeling anxiety

Philippians 2:4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Again in this letter, Paul exhorts the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord. To rejoice in the Lord involves understanding the lordship of Christ — his benevolent and powerful reign. This time, Paul tells them twice in one verse and he tells them to rejoice always, even in the face of persecution and relational difficulties. Paul seemingly goes over the top with this rejoicing stuff, but he does so for the benefit of his readers. In this context, rejoicing in the Lord sets the stage for the next series of commands.

If we learn to rejoice in the Lord — to direct our minds to the awesome truth that Jesus Christ is on the throne of creation and is bringing everything under the power and goodness of his lordship — then we're in a position to respond to whatever the Lord wants of us. Rejoicing always, regardless of circumstances, is counter-intuitive. That's why we need to hear the command as often as Paul issues it.

Here, what the Lord wants of the Philippians is that their "gentleness be evident to all," even those in opposition to the gospel who would otherwise give them every reason not to rejoice. The word "gentleness" here means something along the lines of "gentle forbearance." This is the way Paul wants them to deal with those who are persecuting them. It's the way of Christ: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). A response of gentle forbearance tends to surprise those who oppose us and give credence to the gospel. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

Paul then says, “The Lord is near,” in reference to the return of Christ. We can rejoice in the Lord because his return is near, when he will set everything right. That liberates us, then, to practice gentle forbearance to all so that all may know the Lord and so that the Lord can take care of whatever justice needs to be meted out at the proper time in the proper way.

Verses 4 and 5 set the stage for another challenging command in verse 6. If we rejoice in the Lord, demonstrate gentle forbearance and recognize that the Lord is near, we’ll be in better shape to receive the command regarding anxiety. The “anything” that the Philippians would be most anxious about is the opposition they were facing for their faith in Christ.

Anxiety concerns the future, about which we are uncertain. Particularly, we worry about the opposition to our plans, hopes and dreams. We’re concerned that something or someone — or maybe even God himself — will rise up to prevent us from realizing career, relationship or ministry hopes. Simply, we don’t know if we’re going to get what we want, so we’re anxious.

Here’s a typical scenario of what takes place in our minds as we feel anxious about the future: “What will happen when I talk with this person? How will she respond? What if I tell her the truth? How should I word it? What will she think of me? What will her friends think of me? What will her friends’ friends think of me?” The questions are fast and furious, and our anxiety spirals out of control, and it controls us.

On the other hand, Paul says, “Do not be anxious about anything.” Paul is not supposing that one could ever not be anxious about anything. He’s giving us a way of dealing with anxiety — a way of channeling it, if you will. The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything. It is to “present your requests to God” by means of prayer.

Most followers of Jesus feel something is lacking in their prayer life. We’re better at worrying than praying. A concern appears in our brain and we spend an hour worrying about it without giving one thought to praying about it. Why pray when you can worry? Paul would have us call a time out in our minds when we become aware of anxiety in order to present our requests to God and also to set aside time to work through the issue in prayer.

Whereas we, literally, make our requests “known” to God, we make our gentleness, literally, “known” to people. Prayer, then, helps us be gentle, non-combative people.

We are to pray with thanksgiving. When we give thanks in everything, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, we are seeking to draw water from a well that doesn’t seem to be within us. Yet if faith in Christ resides within us, this well also resides within us. No matter how bad things get, you can always find something for which to be thankful. Once you find one thing, you’ll find another and another. If you start giving thanks, whether you feel thankful or not, you’ll find the well. When you give thanks, you’re acknowledging God as the giver of good gifts. You decide to look at life, no matter how difficult it is right now, for what it is — a gift from God. You look back to the gifts God has given and you look forward to the good gifts he will give, though you know not what they will be other than the new heavens and the new earth. Thankfulness must be chosen. You must decide to give thanks in difficult circumstances. Sometimes the well will bubble up, but more often you must begin by drawing from it. Giving thanks is a discipline. Many circumstances present us with the option of being thankful or resentful. You choose gratitude instead of resentment. Cultivating a lifestyle of thankfulness lessens anxiety.

Sometimes I have difficulty sleeping because I’m anxious about something. At such times I’ll often start giving thanks in rhythm with my breathing. When I inhale, I say, “Thank you, Lord.” When I

exhale, I give thanks for something in particular. Often it's just one or two words. "Thank you, Lord / For Christ." "Thank you, Lord / For life." "Thank you, Lord / For Karen."

The result of dealing with anxiety through prayer and thanksgiving is that we experience the "peace of God" — the peace that God himself enjoys and shares with us. God's peace is his wellness, his wholeness. This peace "transcends understanding" in that it goes beyond the usual anxiety-based ways of dealing with life. Those who know God can enjoy a peace that they themselves cannot arrive at with their own efforts apart from prayer and thankfulness. This peace guards our hearts and minds like a detachment of soldiers guarding a city. When we're anxious, what do our thoughts and feelings want to do? Break free. Take off. Get out of here like a mob on the loose. Well-trained guards are posted at events such as soccer matches and rock concerts where emotions run high. And great destruction has occurred when guards have been unable to restrain mobs at such events. The peace of God keeps us from breaking free into thinking that tramples our inner lives and quite possibly a few other people along the way. Our hearts and minds are thus fortified against anxiety and inaccurate and potentially destructive ways of understanding reality.

God gives us his peace in connection with prayer through the assurance that our all-wise, all-powerful and all-loving Father knows exactly what to do with our requests. We don't experience peace because God knows about our concerns (though he does know about them); we experience peace when we know that he knows about them. Notice that the peace of God is not connected with how God answers the prayer but is connected with the prayer itself. We receive the peace of God in the knowledge that he has heard our prayers and knows what to do with them. The peace of God comes when we know that God, without pulling back the curtains, has assured us that something beautiful is waiting behind them.

You don't necessarily pray and instantaneously experience peace, although God may grant it in this manner. The transformation is more process-oriented, more lifestyle-oriented, more relationship-oriented. The verbs here express continuous action, not one-time action. The peace of God comes through relating to him time and time again, day in and day out, year in and year out.

Have you ever noticed what often happens when your mind wanders off into the future, envisioning potential conversations, wondering how you might word things in order to get the response you want? Your heart starts pumping and your glands kick into gear, and you're anxious. This passage gives us a way to channel our anxiety.

Think of a hydroelectric project. It gathers the water and constructively channels it for the production of energy. That's what we do through prayer. We gather our anxiety and constructively channel it to God through prayer. The product is the peace of God.

This is a better way to live than the way most of us live. If we were to write verse 6 with the way we live our lives, it might come out this way: "Do not be prayerful about anything, but in everything, by worry and fret, with resentment, forget about God." Better to pray. Better to give thanks. Give this other way a try, and see what happens. See if, at some point down the line, you don't experience something of what you might call the peace of God.

A *Time* magazine cover story featured these words: "Now more than ever we are worrying ourselves sick." The following ways to relieve anxiety were offered: behavior therapy, cognitive therapy, antidepressants, minor tranquilizers, exercise, yoga, breathing exercises, meditation, massage, aromatherapy, guided imagery, acupuncture and lifestyle changes.²⁷ Neither prayer nor thankfulness made the list. You have to read the scriptures for the good stuff.

Dealing with culture

Philippians 4:8-9:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

The list of virtues in verse 8 comes mostly from the Greco-Roman world in which the Philippians lived. The list is qualified by the final two virtues, which give it a moral content. These things the Philippians are to “think about” — or take into account. The list is further qualified by another list — the things they have learned from Paul. They are not only to take into account these things but also to put them into practice.

What approach can we take to the culture in which we live? One approach would have us reject everything from the culture in which we live. The opposite approach absorbs things from the culture. In short, ours should be a balanced approach. In these verses, Paul encourages us to evaluate culture in a discriminating way, to neither discard nor adopt everything our culture espouses but to hold it up to the light of what we have learned from the scriptures.

We can therefore look out on our culture and see that in at least some ways, it presents and values some things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are magnificent works that uphold the dignity of humanity. I was struck when walking through Washington, D.C., by the inscriptions on the buildings that spoke of noble themes such as justice and freedom. “Innocent until proven guilty” is an admirable motto. We can take in art, literature, music and movies and find in them the themes that the scriptures featured long ago. Many love songs could be turned into songs about one’s love for God by changing only a few words. The musical *Les Miserables* has drained me emotionally every time I’ve seen it. It’s a powerful show because it mines biblical themes.

Vestiges of God remain in every culture, even ours, where truth is relative and immorality is treated as a virtue. Scholar Gordon Fee, commenting on verses 8 and 9, writes this:

The most common response to such a culture is not discrimination, but rejection. This text suggests a better way, that one approach the marketplace, the arts, the media, the university, looking for what is “true” and “uplifting” and “admirable”; but that one do so with a discriminating eye and heart, for which the Crucified One serves as a template. Indeed, if one does not “consider carefully,” then discriminate on the basis of the gospel, what is rejected very often are the mere trappings, the more visible expressions of the “world,” while its anti-gospel values (relativism, materialism, hedonism, nationalism, individualism, to name but a few) are absorbed into the believer through cultural osmosis. This text reminds us that the head counts for something, after all; but it must be a sanctified head, ready to “practice” the gospel it knows through what has “been learned and received.”²⁶

God is calling to us, not only through the scriptures but through the culture in which we live. Yet not all of it is from God, of course. We let in only what is from God, and the scriptures serve as our sifter. Looking out on our culture, evaluating it in light of scripture and allowing the good things to touch our hearts can actually motivate us to put the things of the scriptures into practice. When the Israelites left Egypt and its pagan culture, they took with them gold and silver, with which they

built the tabernacle (Exodus 12:35-36). There was something good there that could be used to build something great for God.

I keep a picture of Humphrey Bogart hanging on the wall of my study. The picture is from the movie *Casablanca*, and he's wearing his trench coat at the airport. Anyone who has seen the movie remembers that great scene in which he gives up that which he really wants, Ingrid Bergman, for the sake of a greater cause — the fight for freedom.

If we think and act in a discriminating way, the God of peace will be with us. Earlier we saw that if we pray with thanksgiving, the peace of God will be with us. Now we see that if we think and act this way, the God of peace will be with us. God himself, not just his peace, will be with us to relate with us and empower us to think and to act.

Surprising wisdom

In Philippians 4:1-9 we find approaches we wouldn't think of for dealing with the problems of life. Yet here they are, from the mind of God, through the pen of Paul and to the place where we wonder how we should live. When we find ourselves in conflict, we think the gospel. When we're anxious, we pray and give thanks. When we live in a culture that values relativism and immorality, we sift through it for what is good.

Questions

1. How do you think subordinating your agenda to the gospel would help with conflict resolution?
2. Identify and articulate any anxiety you may be currently feeling.
3. How might you address this anxiety through prayer?
4. How might you go about cultivating a spirit of thankfulness in your life?
5. What do you find "true," "uplifting" and "admirable" in secular culture?
6. How might you go about living in a balanced way without indiscriminately discarding or adopting cultural influences?

The Secret of Contentment

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Richard utters these famous words before putting his wicked plans into action: "Now is the winter of our discontent."

Whether or not we have someone planning seasons of discontent for us, we enter such seasons, or such seasons are thrust upon us. We find ourselves in circumstances that war against contentment. Yet in Philippians 4:10-13, the Apostle Paul claims to be content in every season. He is a man for all seasons. The source of his contentment is Christ, and because he is content in Christ, he is able to have the kind of relationships most of us would crave. If we are content in Christ, we will be free to enjoy such relationships as well. In our study of Philippians, we arrive at the classic biblical passage on contentment and one of Paul's best-known sentences: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

In Philippians 4:10-20, Paul finishes with the topic he began the letter with: the Philippians' participation in the gospel with him (Philippians 1:3-7). In Philippians 4:6 he told them not to be anxious about anything. Now, as is typical in Philippians, he provides a model for what he's talking about. In this case, as in Philippians 1 and 3, the model is himself.

Philippians 4:10-13:

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Rejoicing in friendship

The cause for Paul's rejoicing is the renewal of the Philippians' concern for him as expressed in their recent gift in support of his efforts to advance the gospel. As verse 11 makes clear, Paul's joy is not connected with the meeting of his needs. He does not rejoice so much in the gift as in what it represents: the friendship he shares with these people and the partnership he has with them in the gospel mission. Giving and receiving was a mark of friendship in the Greco-Roman world.

In speaking of his affection for and confidence in these people, Paul earlier said, "It is right for me to feel [literally, 'think'] this way about all of you ..." (Philippians 1:7). Now he says that they have, literally, revived their "thinking" for him. They think about him and the gospel the way he thinks about them and the gospel, and this brings him joy. This word, translated "concern" or "feel," is a key word throughout Philippians and is used to convey an other-centered and gospel-centered mindset (Philippians 2:2, 5; 3:15; 4:2). Their recent gift speaks of their concern for the gospel, and this brings Paul joy. Paul will say in verse 17, "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account."

The words "at last" imply some sort of unexpected delay in the giving of the gift. The first part of verse 10 could be open to misunderstanding, so Paul adds a word of clarification. He says he knows

they were concerned for him and for the gospel but simply lacked the opportunity to contribute. They lacked the opportunity to express their thinking.

This text instructs us in how to receive a gift. When someone gives you a gift, receive it as a sign of friendship. Don't focus on the gift. It's not about the stuff; it's about the person who gave the gift. For someone to support you in your efforts to serve God is cause for double rejoicing. You rejoice not only in the friendship but also in the partnership. You're doing something great together. Personally, I find it almost unbelievable that people in the church give of their finances so that I can be a pastor and so that we can advance the gospel together. I treasure their friendship and their partnership.

The text also warns against drawing conclusions about someone's behavior before all the facts are in. The Philippians wanted to contribute, but they lacked opportunity. When you expect someone to do something and he or she doesn't do it, you may not have all the facts. There could be a very simple explanation for that person's lack of response. That person may not know what you know, or he may just lack opportunity.

Paul adds a further word of clarification in verse 11. He is not rejoicing because his needs have been met. As it concerns his "need," Paul says he has "learned to be content whatever the circumstances." He is not dependent on the Philippians' gift in order to rejoice in the Lord. His friendship and partnership with them is not based on their usefulness to him. Paul values the Philippians for who they are, not what they can do for him. There is a relationship in which freedom reigns. Paul is not dependent on the Philippians to meet his needs, so he is free. The Philippians know that Paul is not dependent on them, so they are free. Guilt plays no part in this relationship. The key to the arrangement is that Paul is content whether or not the Philippians support him financially.

Many relationships are based on guilt. Person 1 expects Person 2 to meet her needs. Person 2 feels burdened to meet those needs. Person 1 does not feel that Person 2 is meeting her needs. Person 2 herself feels a "need" to meet needs, so she keeps trying and keeps hoping that she will find the right approach. Still, Person 1 is unsatisfied. In today's language, Person 2 has become "co-dependent." Soon, Person 2 feels that no matter what she tries, Person 1 will not be satisfied. The reality is that no one can meet Person 1's need, but Person 2 takes a long time to figure this out. Too often, we link our contentment to the expectations we have for someone instead of to our relationship with Christ. Because we do, we become emotionally entangled in relational knots.

Paul appreciates the friendship and partnership he has with the Philippians. He refuses to make a premature evaluation of their behavior. He appreciates who they are, not what they can do for him. The key to this outlook is the contentment he has in his relationship with Christ.

Learning to be content

The word translated "content" was a favorite of Stoic philosophers. They wanted to be "content" regardless of circumstances. They attempted to do so by killing their desires. Epictetus, a Greek philosopher, said this: "Begin with a cup or a household utensil; if it breaks, say, 'I don't care.' Go on to a horse or pet dog; if anything happens to it, say, 'I don't care.' Go on to yourself, and if you are hurt or injured in any way, say, 'I don't care.' If you go on long enough and if you try hard enough, you will come to a stage when you can watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die, and say, 'I don't care.'"²⁹ As we shall see, Paul's concept of contentment is entirely different.

Literally, Paul says that he has learned "in the circumstances" to be content. Yes, he has learned to be content whatever the circumstances. But he learned this by being in the circumstances, not by killing his emotions.

In verse 12, Paul explains the circumstances in which he has found himself. He has been in “any and every situation,” from having much to having little. As in verse 11, he has learned from being in the circumstances. He did not learn to be content in any and every situation *apart* from being in those situations. He has “learned the secret” of being *in* those situations.

The word translated “learned the secret,” which is different from the word translated “learned” in verse 11, was used of initiation into pagan mystery religions. Once someone endured the painful initiation process, he or she learned the secrets of the religion. Paul takes words such as “content” and “learned the secret” from the pagan world in which the Philippians lived and invests them with different meanings. The biblical faith that Paul espouses is the reality after which the pagan parodies are striving.

Paul says he knows, or has experienced, being in need and having plenty. The word “know” implies that he has learned something. You can experience something and still not learn anything from it. Such is not the case with Paul. He has learned from experience. Note that Paul not only learned to be content with little, he also learned to be content with much. Wealth in no way guarantees contentment. Contentment in the midst of riches must be learned.

Listen to what the Lord tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8:10-18 before they enter the Promised Land:

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

Those who have much are faced with the temptation to forget him who provided it for them and thereby forfeit contentment, for true contentment comes from God.

The secret of contentment

So, what’s the secret? This: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” The pronoun “him” is a reference to Christ (Ephesians 6:10; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 2:1, 4:17).

Here Paul parts company with the pagan worshipers and philosophers. Paul was initiated, or baptized, into Christ, not some pagan mystery religion. Whatever contentment the Stoics were able to achieve came from whatever strength they could muster. They would be proud of their inner strength and contentment. Paul’s source of contentment is someone other than himself: Christ. As for pride, how could Paul be proud of something he attributed to another?

When Paul says he can “do everything,” he doesn’t mean, of course, that he can literally do everything. We wouldn’t read this and suppose that Paul meant he could jump to the moon. To do everything, or to be able for everything, has to do with being content in all circumstances. The word translated “everything” was also used twice in verse 12 in the phrase translated “any and every

situation.” Paul is saying that he is able to be content in all situations. And remember where he is writing this letter from: prison.

Literally, Paul is able to be content “in” Christ. As noted earlier, the word “in” was also used in verse 11, where Paul said he had learned “in” his circumstances to be content. At the same time that he is “in” conditions that would seem unfavorable to contentment, he is also “in” Christ. Christ is with him in the situations. This makes all the difference. If he’s alone, all he has is what a Stoic has: the self. The self isn’t sufficient for contentment — at least the way the scriptures define it — in any and every situation. Christ is sufficient.

What does Christ do for Paul? He gives him strength. Strength for what? Strength to be content. How does Christ do this?

In the previous chapter, Paul said that for the sake of knowing Christ, he relinquished power, status and privileges, which would normally be considered as contributing to one’s contentment (Philippians 3:4-11). More than anything else, Paul’s contentment comes from knowing Christ.

Christ himself gives Paul strength to know him. Christ does this through his Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul writes this:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

These verses tell us that God gives strength by means of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Christ (Matthew 10:20, Romans 8:9). These verses also tell us that the Spirit gives strength to grasp the enormity of Christ’s love — even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Whatever the circumstances in which you find yourself, learn from them. Every circumstance is an opportunity to learn. Don’t waste it. If you have much, you have an opportunity to learn. If you have little, you have an opportunity to learn. From the perspective of this passage, every circumstance is an opportunity to learn to be content in that situation. You learn to be content by allowing the Holy Spirit to draw you closer to Christ. That’s the secret. Whatever your circumstances, learn the secret.

Your ability to be content in any and every situation is connected with your relationship with Christ, which Christ himself fosters through his Holy Spirit. Whatever circumstances you are “in,” you are also “in” Christ. Christ is with you in it. When you walk with Christ in any and every situation, an intimacy with him develops that touches the deepest longings of your heart. Also, as you and Christ emerge from each situation, you begin to believe more fully that he is trustworthy.

If we believed that God is who he says he is, will do what he says he will do and loves us as much as he says he loves us, it’s debatable whether we’d ever have even one moment of discontentment. Ah, but there’s the rub. We don’t believe it. The Spirit of Christ therefore strengthens us to believe the truth about God. It behooves us, then, to soak our minds in the truth, as revealed in the scriptures, to pray that God would activate his Spirit to strengthen our faith and to mentally cling to what the scriptures tell us is true.

I’m sure many of you can look back at past seasons of discontentment with the knowledge that you emerged from them in better shape than when you entered them. With the perspective gained from hindsight, you smile at what once seemed so troublesome. This perspective should offer encouragement

for whatever circumstances are currently causing you discontentment. Is there any reason to think that you won't be able to someday look back on this current season and smile at what once caused you to be discontent? Probably not.

Although the biblical secret of contentment is quite different from the pagan one, the latter masquerades as the former. Sometimes, we think we're pursuing biblical contentment when in fact we're pursuing a pagan imitation of it.

First of all, no painful initiation process is required. You start following Jesus. You get baptized. Nothing is hidden; all is out in the open. When Christ enters your life, you have what you need for contentment: Christ.

Second, you don't seek contentment by becoming self-sufficient; you seek contentment by becoming Christ-sufficient. Most philosophies and self-help books offer you the same thing the Stoics did: the self. It isn't enough.

Third, you don't seek contentment by killing your desires; you seek contentment through your desires. The basic human desires for food, water, clothing, shelter and intimacy are used in the scriptures to represent desire for God and Christ. We don't find Christ by killing our desires; we find Christ in our desires. People kill their desires because they're afraid of pain. If you don't want anything, you won't be disappointed — or so the thinking goes. The people of the scriptures are men and women of strong passions, who feel things deeply, who weep openly and who pour out their hearts to God. But in their passions and through their passions, and in and through their pain, they find God. Do you know what you miss out on if you kill your desires? You miss out on love. Love desires. Love feels. Love can get hurt. A Stoic doesn't love because he doesn't think love is worth the risk of being hurt.

I was greatly encouraged at a recent meeting when one of our elders was being reviewed. He talked about how he felt secure in God's love for him, though he acknowledged that he hasn't always felt that way. He learned. Today, he's mostly content. His story gave me hope. I, too, can learn. So can you.

Knowing Christ

So, the secret is out. The secret to contentment is knowing Christ. Now we know it. But we still must learn it. We learn contentment by being in situations that would normally make us discontent. But if we learn it, we'll find new joy and freedom in relationships.

Questions

1. What have you learned about contentment from the circumstances in which you have found yourself?
2. What have you known of being in need and of having plenty?
3. How do you respond to this statement: "Your ability to be content in any and every situation is connected with your relationship with Christ, which Christ himself fosters through his Holy Spirit"?
4. How do you respond to this statement: "You don't seek contentment by being self-sufficient; you seek contentment by being Christ-sufficient"?
5. How do you respond to this statement: "You don't seek contentment by killing your desires; you seek contentment through your desires"?

6. How do you respond to this statement: "Contentment is learned by being in situations that would normally make us discontent"?

The Gospel is Worth Everything You Can Give It

Several years ago, some other Americans and I were worshiping with some Mexicans in their church in a poor area of Ensenada. The church was no more than a shack with a few splintered benches inside. A bare light bulb dangled from a chord that hung from the ceiling. This church took its offerings by placing a plate on a chair to the side and inviting people to come forward during an extended time of signing. One by one people got up from their seats and made their way over to the offering plate. Within a few minutes, they had all completed their offerings and had retaken their seats. All except one man, that is.

This man got up at the same time as the others, but it took him much longer to complete the task. He was in his 80s, and he could do no more than shuffle his way to the offering plate. Long after everyone else had retaken his or her seat, he was still moving toward the offering plate, as quickly as he could. When he arrived, he leaned over and dropped a few coins into the plate; then he turned around and headed back toward his seat. The entire operation took about 10 minutes.

I've thought about the man often. I think about him when I read or hear about the story of the widow who gave two small copper coins out of her poverty (Luke 21:1-4). And I think about him when I come upon a passage such as Philippians 4:14-20, where Paul commends his friends and partners for supporting him in his efforts to advance the gospel. I get the impression from both the old man in Mexico and Paul's words in Philippians that the gospel is worth everything you can give it.

In Philippians 4:10, Paul began responding to the Philippians' recent contribution to the work of the gospel. In verse 14, he continues.

Philippians 4:14-20:

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

A beautiful thing

Verse 14 offers clarification for what Paul has said in verses 10 through 13, which could be interpreted to mean that he is indifferent toward their gift. Such is not the case. He says they have done a good, or beautiful, thing. The verb translated "share" in verse 14 is related to the noun translated "partnership" in Philippians 1:5, as is the slightly different verb translated "shared" in verse 15. The noun was used of a business partnership. The enterprise Paul has in mind here is the gospel. The Philippians have partnered with Paul to advance the gospel. One of the ways they have done this is by supporting Paul financially. His efforts to advance the gospel have landed him in prison, and the Philippians have sent

a gift to him in his imprisonment. Thus, they have supported him in his “troubles.” The Philippians are enduring the similar “struggle” of Roman persecution (Philippians 1:29-30).

The Philippians share with Paul in his suffering. When you’re suffering, you want to know that you’re not going through it alone. Paul is suffering, but he’s not alone. His dear friends from Philippi are, in a sense, with him. Although the Philippians are not in prison, they are facing similar opposition because of the gospel. When you’re suffering, you want a friend who knows what you’re going through. To some extent, Paul’s friends from Philippi know what he’s going through. What the Philippians have done for Paul is, indeed, a beautiful thing. The gospel has created this beautiful friendship and partnership.

To give to the work of the gospel is a good thing, even a beautiful thing. Those who are seeking to advance the gospel, both near and far, often endure great hardship. When we support these people with our prayers and with our finances, we become partners with them. We share in their troubles. If you are a follower of Jesus, I suggest that you consider supporting missionaries with your money and your prayers. Each and every supporter becomes an important person to a missionary. The missionary feels that others are sharing in his troubles.

Recounting the partnership

Paul now recounts for the Philippians the history of their partnership. In doing so, he acknowledges that he is telling them what they already know. Why would he tell them something they already know? First, Paul delights in sharing with the Philippians how they have helped him. He is one friend delighting in recounting how another friend has contributed to his life. Second, he is telling them what he sees in them. Many times, people don’t see their good desires and good actions; they only see their bad desires and bad actions. It takes a friend to say, “I see this in you.” Paul tells the Philippians what he sees in them. He sees good, for it was “good” of them to share with him. He tells them he has seen devotion to the gospel in them right from the beginning.

Philippi was in the region of Macedonia, where Paul also established other churches. Yet in the early days, no other church from that region made a contribution to Paul’s gospel work aside from the Philippian church. In fact, Paul refused gifts from other churches in order not to be a burden to them and to offer the gospel free of charge (1 Corinthians 9:18; 2 Corinthians 11:8-9, 12:14; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10). Yet he accepted gifts from the Philippians. The reason for his acceptance of their gifts is probably tied to his unique relationship with them. In other cases, Paul refused gifts so that the gospel could be clearly and freely presented, no strings attached. Perhaps his relationship with the Philippians is such that he knows they will not misunderstand him. In their case, he believes his acceptance of their gift will not pollute the presentation of the gospel. Even so, he is extra careful to make sure they understand his motives.

With the words “the matter of giving and receiving,” Paul is using the language of commerce. In a sense, the Philippians have opened an account with Paul. But this is an equal relationship, not a patron-client relationship, because this language was also used in friendship. Friends would “give” to each other and “receive” from each other. In this relationship, Paul would be expected to reciprocate. In a sense, he promises as much in verse 19.

The Philippians “even” gave to him when he was in Thessalonica, and they did so more than once. Thessalonica was the first place Paul visited after he founded the church in Philippi (Acts 17:1-9). Very quickly after coming to Christ, they began their pattern of contributing to Paul.

Earlier, Paul wrote that he was not rejoicing in the Lord because they met his “need” (verse 11); now he acknowledges that he was in “need.” Paul is not dependent on them; he’s dependent on the Lord (verses 11 and 12). Here, the Lord has chosen to provide for him through the Philippians. Paul is communicating to them that they have met his need while at the same time saying that he is not dependent on them to meet his need. He does two things for them at the same time: He values them and he liberates them. He will not be a burden to them, yet he will let them know that they have helped him.

Telling others what they mean to you is important. If someone has been in your life for a long time, sharing how that person has helped you over the years can be a delightful experience. You’ll enjoy doing so, and you’ll bless your friend. It’s important to tell people the vibrancy of Christ you see in them. Many times, they can’t see it for themselves. It’s important not only to value people but to liberate them. If someone does meet our needs, it’s easy to think we are dependent on that person, not the Lord, and then we become clingy. We must be appreciative but not clingy.

Evidence of vibrancy

In verse 17, Paul yet again adds a word of clarification. When it comes to the matter of giving and receiving money, words of clarification are important.

He says, “Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.” What he’s most excited about is not what he’s receiving from them but what’s happening with them. He expresses the same sentiment in 2 Corinthians 12:14, where he tells the Corinthians that “what I want is not your possessions but you.”

The word translated “account” is the same word translated “matter” in verse 15. The language of commerce is again in play. The entire phrase translated “what may be credited to your account” is a reference to interest. The word translated “what” would literally be translated “fruit.” Paul prayed in Philippians 1:11 that the Philippians would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.” Paul sees them as making an investment that bears interest. He sees them as fruitful. He’s “looking for” evidence of a vibrant relationship with Christ, and he’s finding it in their eagerness to contribute to the gospel. The commercial metaphor implies that the Philippians, after contributing to Paul, are richer spiritually, though they may be poorer materially.

If someone came looking at your life for evidence of a vibrant relationship with Christ, one place he or she might look is your checkbook. You can tell a lot about people by the way they handle money. The way we spend our money usually says something about our relationship with Christ and our attitude toward the gospel. It may be a sign of spiritual fruitfulness, or lack thereof.

An acceptable sacrifice

In verse 18, Paul says the Philippians have more than fulfilled their obligations in the matter of giving and receiving. Because of their gift, which was carried to him by Epaphroditus, he is amply supplied.

Paul switches from the language of commerce to the language of worship. He sees their gift not only as payment in a reciprocal arrangement and as an interest-bearing investment, he also sees it as an act of worship. The Israelites were to offer up animals that they owned as whole burnt offerings that produced “an aroma pleasing to the Lord” (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17). The whole burnt offerings represented complete surrender to God. Such dedication was pleasing to God.

The Philippians parted not with animals but with money, and it was a costly sacrifice. They would no doubt be among the churches Paul commended for contributing to help believers: “And now,

brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). If it was good, or beautiful, for the Philippians to contribute to the work of the gospel, it was also a fragrant offering, pleasing to God.

When one sees her possessions as belonging to God and is willing to part with them so that the gospel may advance, she has surrendered her life to God, and God is pleased. To part with money is a costly sacrifice, but when we do so for the sake of the gospel, the sacrifice is acceptable and pleasing to God.

God meets needs

Evidently the Philippians’ giving to Paul created for them a “need.” In this arrangement, Paul would now be expected to reciprocate. They met his “need” (verse 16), so now it would be his turn to give to them, and their turn to receive. But Paul is in no position to meet their need. He envisions God holding up his end of the deal, so Paul calls him “my God.” Paul had learned that his God meets needs. In verse 18, Paul said, literally, that he had been “filled” by their gifts. Now he says that God will, literally, “fill” every need of theirs. Contextually, the primary reference to need is a material one, but the word “all” means that other needs are in view as well.

God will meet these needs, literally, “according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” “Glory” is a reference to God’s sovereignty. He is the King with an abundant supply of riches. These riches are made available in Christ. The Philippians have already received God’s greatest riches in Christ: salvation. Paul says that God is not only able to meet needs but that he also does so in a way that is commensurate with his riches in Christ. In other words, he is lavish.

Paul seems to be promising, at the least, that God will meet the needs of the Philippians because they have contributed to the gospel in a way that created a need for them. He doesn’t specify what constitutes a “need” in the Philippians’ case, nor does he say how God will meet their needs or when he will do so. God knows what constitutes the Philippians’ needs, and we are left to believe that he will meet those needs in his perfect timing and in a lavish way.

Throughout my 30s and into my 40s, I felt I was giving my life to the gospel. As I got older, I wanted a wife. Despite what I thought were reasonable efforts on my part(!), I couldn’t find one. Evidently, in God’s view, I didn’t need a wife. On Aug. 19, 2000, when I was 42 years old, God gave me a wife. That’s when I needed a wife, I presume. And with Karen, I must say that God has met a need according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. He’s been lavish.

There’s nothing in this passage to suggest that God will meet what we think our needs are when we think he should meet them. Neither is there anything to suggest that God will necessarily meet every need before we see Jesus face to face. But some day, he *will* meet every need.

Devote yourself to the Lord. Give your life to him. See all of your life as belonging to him, including your financial resources. Seek him on how to contribute to the work of the gospel. Seek to be generous, and trust God to know your needs and meet them in his perfect timing and in his lavish way.

When Paul talks about riches in glory in Christ Jesus, he seems to be inspired to worship. That’s what he does in verse 20. In this arrangement of giving and receiving, we might ask, “What does God get out of the deal?” God gets glory. When people devote themselves to Christ and partner with others

who seek to advance the gospel, and when God meets needs lavishly, he is glorified. In this, all creation will see what he is like and glorify him forever.

A check in the mail

During my trip to Ensenada in 1987, I met a man named Shaun. He was an American missionary who was committed to loving the Mexican people and sharing the gospel with them in word and deed. I began supporting him at this time, sending him a check each month. I've read his monthly support letters through the years, and he's had more than his share of troubles. Supporters have dropped out, he's run out of funds and he's had an excruciating array of health problems. All the while, he's continued in ministry, faithfully loving the Mexican people. In the mid-1990s, he got married in Ensenada to a Mexican woman he had met there. At the last minute, I decided to attend his wedding. I never had a chance to talk to him at the reception, but right before the wedding started we saw each other. Our eyes met for a brief moment, and he shook his head as he moved away. We weren't able to speak, but in the look of his eyes and the shake of his head, I understood how much I meant to him. I understood how much it meant to him to have a friend and partner write him a check each month.

I haven't seen Shaun since his wedding day. In 1996, I went to Brazil on a short-term missions trip. Because he lives and serves in Latin America, I thought Shaun would be interested, so I sent him a letter describing plans for the trip. Several days later I received in the mail a note from Shaun. And a check. The note read: "Brazil: We're with you!" The last thing I expected my letter to generate was a support check from this man, who was barely scraping by each month on the funds that people gave him for his labor of love. But I guess I should have known better. This is a man who has given his life to the work of the gospel. He has a vibrant relationship with Christ. And the gospel is worth everything you can give it.

In verses 21 through 23, Paul concludes his letter.

The gospel penetrates strongholds

Philippians 4:21-23:

Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

The important thing to note in Paul's conclusion, and what sets it apart, is his reference to Caesar's household. People who were in "Caesar's household" would have been in the Roman civil service. The "palace guard" that Paul referred to in Philippians 1:13 would be among Caesar's household, and these are the people Paul may have in mind. The palace guard became aware that Paul's imprisonment was for the cause of Christ. Those who belong to Caesar's household in this case are followers of Jesus, inasmuch as they send their greetings to the Philippian believers. Perhaps those guarding Paul had converted to Christ. At any rate, the gospel has penetrated the heart of Rome's power structure: the household of Caesar. This would be a great encouragement to the Philippian believers, who are being oppressed by Caesar. Some of the Romans are with the Philippians in their efforts to proclaim Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar.

The gospel is more powerful than whatever opposes it. It can penetrate the household of the fiercest tyrant or the heart of the most stalwart atheist. Where might you go with the powerful proclamation that Jesus is Lord?

Questions

1. How are you supporting missionary work, or how might you consider doing so or doing so in a new way?
2. Think of someone you appreciate and consider expressing your appreciation to that person.
3. What values do you think are reflected in the way you spend your money?
4. How does the knowledge that all your possessions belong to God influence you?

Notes:

- ¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 57-58.
- ² *Patton* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., 1969, renewed 1997).
- ³ *Marvin's Room* (Miramax Films, 1969).
- ⁴ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, Ore: Multnomah Press, 1986), 50.
- ⁵ Piper, 15.
- ⁶ John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 64.
- ⁷ Mark Altrogge, "One Pure and Holy Passion," (PDI Praise/Dayspring Music, 1988).
- ⁸ *City Slickers* (MGM Studios, 1991).
- ⁹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 101.
- ¹⁰ Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1997), 80.
- ¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers), 106.
- ¹² *Braveheart* (Paramount Pictures, 1995).
- ¹³ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 374.
- ¹⁴ *A River Runs Through It* (Sony Pictures, 1992).
- ¹⁵ Bruce Waltke, *CRUX* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College, 1992).
- ¹⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 44.
- ¹⁷ Reported by Joan Ryan (San Francisco Chronicle, Dec. 14, 1995), E1.
- ¹⁸ *The Lion King* (The Walt Disney Co).
- ¹⁹ List 1
See the dogs,
See the evil workers,
See the mutilation (*katatomē*).
For we are the circumcision (*peritomē*),
Who worship by the Spirit of God,
And who glory in Christ Jesus,
And who put no confidence in the flesh.
- List 2
Circumcised on the eighth day,
Of the people of Israel,
Of the tribe of Benjamin,
A Hebrew of Hebrews;
According to the law, a Pharisee;
According to zeal, persecuting the church;
According to legalistic righteousness, faultless.
- ²⁰ Lee Knapp, "The Making of an Original" (*Christianity Today*, Dec. 27, 2000).
- ²¹ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1979), 198-99.
- ²² Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, *Les Miserables* (Cameron Mackintosh Overseas Limited, 2005).
- ²³ David James Duncan, *The River Why* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 277-78.
- ²⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Best of A.W. Tozer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House Co., 1978), 15-16.

²⁵ Philippians 3

Like (*summorphon*, 3:21)

Is (*uparchei*, 3:20)

Lowly (*tapeinoseos*, 3:21)

Bring everything under control (3:21)

Lord Jesus Christ (3:20)

Glory (3:21)

Philippians 2

Very nature (*morphē*, 2:6), appearance (*morphē*, 2:7)

Being (*uparchon*, 2:6)

Humbled (*etapeionsen*, 2:8)

Every knee should bow (2:20)

Jesus Christ is Lord (2:11)

Glory (2:11)

²⁶ N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 101.

²⁷ Christine Gorman, Jeffrey Kluger and Sora Song, *The Science of Anxiety* (*Time* magazine, June 10, 2002), 46.

²⁸ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 421.

²⁹ Quoted by William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 104.

