

Series: The Church — A People with A Purpose

Title: Becoming a Gospel Witness

Text: Philippians 1:12-15

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Verse 12

The word “gospel” comes from a Greek word that literally meant “good news.” Within the early church, it was used as a designation for the Christian message. It was a fitting moniker because of the way Christ provided salvation from sin and sin’s consequences. Before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He commissioned His church to proclaim the gospel. In Mark 16:15-16, He said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

Paul was a faithful herald of the gospel. He lived his life so that others might hear about the good news of Jesus. For the sake of the Christian message, he even endured various harsh circumstances. He spoke of such realities in Philippians 1:12, saying, “Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually advanced the gospel.” Of what did Paul speak when he said “what has happened to me?” It seems his words were a reference to the trials he encountered as a gospel minister. From what we read in the New Testament, we know he was often subject to severe hardship because of His preaching. He sometimes went without food (Philippians 4:12) and he often faced the threat of death (Acts 23:12). When writing to the Corinthians, he described the difficulties he faced in more detail:

Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, and dangers among false brothers; toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and without clothing (2 Corinthians 11:24-27).

Subsequent material in Paul’s letter to the Philippians makes it seem the church had made an inquiry concerning the apostle’s well-being. They knew he was imprisoned and they were concerned about their founding pastor.¹ As a result, Paul relied on two ministry assistants — Timothy (Philippians 2:19-24) and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25-30) — to communicate with the Philippians concerning his estate. In Philippians 2:23, he explained his rationale for sending Timothy — “Therefore, I hope to send him as soon as I see how things go with me.”

In reply to the church’s inquiry, Paul sent news that his difficulties had “actually resulted in the advance of the gospel.” Though the apostle had experienced hard times, the truth of Jesus had made progress in the Roman Empire. Such gospel advancement was the driving motivation for the man’s ministry (2 Thessalonians 3:1). Later in his letter, he would use the same Greek word rendered “advance” in

¹ Martin, 75.

Philippians 1:12 to speak of how he served for the sake of the Philippians “progress and joy in the faith” (Philippians 1:25). Though Paul was imprisoned because of his preaching, the Lord used the ordeal as a catalyst for church growth.

Verse 13

Paul saw a purpose in all of his suffering. In verse 13, he said, “...so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is because I am in Christ.” The words “so that” were ones that were used to intentionally speak of purpose in the ancient world. In our verse, they reveal that Paul regarded his imprisonment (“what has happened to me” in verse 12) as having a positive result. Namely, Paul’s Roman prison cell had provided him a platform for preaching the gospel.

In the original language of the the New Testament, the words rendered “imprisonment” literally meant “bonds” or “chains.” At the time of his writing, Paul was bound in iron fetters. Some believe he would have been shackled to a Roman soldier to ensure he couldn’t escape. While many would have regarded such circumstances negatively, Paul saw a silver lining. Every time a new Roman soldier reported for duty, Paul had a new prospect for evangelism.

According to the apostle, “the whole imperial guard,” along with “everyone else,” had become aware that he was chained because of Christ. The Greek rendered “imperial guard” in Philippians 1:13 referred to the dwelling place of the emperor’s personal guard. At strategic locations throughout the Roman Empire, the emperor positioned regiments of his vaunted Praetorian Guard.² The group was comprised of a select group of soldiers. Augustus originally established the elite regiment, charging them with protecting the ruler and securing stability throughout the empire.³ Members of the Praetorian Guard received double pay and inherited special privileges. In time, they became so powerful that emperors had to court their favor.⁴

Considering the tense political scene within first-century Jerusalem, Paul was perhaps regarded as a threat to national interests. His preaching in places like Thessalonica had caused an uproar (Acts 17:1-9). Messianic proclamations of all sorts were liable to get one in trouble with the government. The emperor saw Jerusalem and Israel as a strategic stronghold for national interests; thus, those who spoke of any other sort of national king were subject to imprisonment or death. Because of the nature of his preaching, and because of how it stirred up the people of Judea, Paul was taken to Rome. None other than the Praetorian Guard kept watch over him, since he was viewed as a religious insurgent who posed a potential threat to national security.

For many, Paul’s predicament may have seemed like an end to his missionary ministry. How could one advance the Christian message while chained to an elite soldier? What seemed hopeless to others was used within the providence of God for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. Each change of guard gave an opportunity for gospel proclamation. As Paul met different guards and governmental officials, he told

² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

³ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁴ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

about the reason for his imprisonment. He utilized his encounters and experiences for the sake of Christ. The book of Acts gives witness to the fact that Paul liked to leverage his legal troubles for this purpose. When interrogated on one occasion, he used his accusers' questions as an occasion for sharing the gospel. As he stood before Felix, he said, "Today I am on trial before you concerning the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 24:21).

Like Paul, every believer has opportunities for gospel advancement. Even circumstances that seem hopeless can be used as platforms for preaching Christ. No matter where a believer finds him or herself in life, he or she has a circle of influence that can be utilized for missions and evangelism. All circumstances, even the most dry, barren, and bleak, can be used for heralding the gospel! Paul's experience reveals this to be true.

Verse 14

Not only did Paul's imprisonment provide opportunities to share the gospel, it also served as a catalyst to encourage others to share. In verse 14, he said, "Most of the brothers have gained confidence in the Lord from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the word, fearlessly." The word "brothers" referred to fellow believers in Christ. Perhaps Paul had in view the believers at the first-century church in Rome. While he was incarcerated in the capital city, a number of them may have checked on him from time to time. It is likely the church had developed a meaningful relationship with him, looking out for his physical and emotional state.

Though the Roman Christians sought to encourage the chained apostle, he ended up having an effect on them. According to Paul, "most of" them gained more confidence to share the gospel themselves. The terminology of verse 14 was used in the ancient world to speak of a majority within a group.⁵ Some of the believers at Rome didn't derive much comfort or encouragement from his ministry, the vast majority were emboldened. Paul said they "gained confidence." The language depicted one being encouraged.⁶ At other points in his letter, Paul used the same terminology to speak of the confidence he had in gospel ministry (Philippians 1:6, 25; 2:24).

Paul's encouragement didn't lead to meaningless emotion or hype. The Philippians were provoked to practical action. As a result of their interaction with the apostle, they began "to speak the message fearlessly." Paul used a word translated "dare" to speak of their newfound zeal. The term was one that referred to boldness. A literal rendering of Philippians 1:14 depicts the Philippians as being "more abundantly bold" in their witness.⁷ Their zeal for evangelism and missions had increased because of the imprisoned apostle's zeal.

Such boldness is a prerequisite for faithful gospel ministry. When the early church aimed to fulfill the Great Commission, they prayed for such zeal. In the book of Acts, Luke gave the content of one of their prayers — "And now, Lord, consider their

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 449.

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 449.

⁷ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

threats, and grant that your servants may speak your word with all *boldness*" (Acts 4:29).

Why did the early church pray for boldness? If you read the account surrounding Acts 4:29, you will notice that the church was under threat of persecution. They were afraid to share the gospel, because they were afraid of arrest and corporal punishment. Peter and John had been threatened and ordered to stop preaching Christ (Acts 4:5-23), so the church was scared. Recognizing their predicament, God's people prayed for boldness. Such boldness is the antidote to fear.

It is important to note that the events of Acts 4 were related to evangelism. Paul's words in Philippians 1:14 concerning the boldness of the believers in Rome were related to evangelism as well. Both situations demonstrate that fear of sharing the gospel is overcome by gospel boldness. Notice from Philippians 1:14 that the Paul's example had provoked the Romans to evangelize "fearlessly."

Fear is a common response for those who seek to fulfill the Great Commission. To overcome such fear, one needs to cultivate spiritual boldness. The aim should be to become like Paul who said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). But how can one develop such boldness?

Our current text teaches us that relationships with other believers can be a catalyst. The Romans became more bold when they saw the boldness of Paul. The Lord often works in such ways. He uses His children to motivate His children. He can use one's commitment to gospel ministry to make a similar commitment grow in the hearts of others. Such mutual encouragement is a primary purpose of the church's regular gathering. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching."

Verse 15

Paul continued his discussion of gospel ministry by mentioning the fact that there were many in his day who preached Christ from impure motives. He said, "To be sure, some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will" (Philippians 1:15). Though their exact identity is unknown to us, Paul was aware of some individuals who were preaching Christ from baser motives. He said they were driven by "envy and rivalry." A.T. Robertson has rightly remarked that such motives are "surely the lowest of motives for preaching Christ."⁸

The first term ("envy") spoke of "pain felt and malignity conceived at the sight of excellence or happiness."⁹ It portrayed one who was perturbed by the ministry success of others. Perhaps the people of whom Paul spoke were jealous of his success in church planting. They resented him because of how he had been mightily used by the Lord. They were filled with "petty and personal" jealousy.¹⁰

⁸ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁹ Martin, 78.

¹⁰ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

The second term (“rivalry”) is one that has been translated “strife” by some modern translations. Within the New Testament, the term was used on several occasions to speak of the root of divisiveness within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:3; 2 Corinthians 12:20). When believers compare themselves to one another, a toxic spirit is sure to ensue. Such was the case with Paul’s ministry. The preachers of whom he spoke had fallen into the habit of comparing their ministry success to that of the famous apostle. Their ministry and preaching was driven by a zeal to outdo him.

Because of their jealousy-infused motives, Paul’s counterparts took delight in his imprisonment. The preachers were not heretics or false teachers. Rather, they were genuine gospel preachers who resented Paul for some reason.¹¹ If both Barnabas (Acts 15:37-39) and Peter (Galatians 2:11) had contention with the apostle, it shouldn’t be remarkable to think other good ministers did as well. Perhaps the individuals of verse 15 were jealous of Paul’s prowess and effectiveness in gospel ministry.¹² They could have used the apostle’s incarceration as a chance to promote themselves. Maybe they did what Job’s friends did (Job 4:7-8) — they claimed that Paul’s circumstances were the result of some sin on his part. In ancient Judaism, it was commonly believed that trials and troubles were a result of personal sin (John 9:1-2). Whatever the case, Paul’s opponents could have served as a great source of discouragement. The apostle diffused the controversy by simply rejoicing in the good they were doing for the cause of Christ.

There is a lot we can learn from Paul’s response. The ugliness that comes from envy and comparison is alive and well in modern Christianity. Some contemporary ministers are renown for bickering with other ministers. Though such sin is often masked behind a supposed zeal for pure doctrine or Christ-honoring methods, petty jealousy is often the real culprit. It would do the church well to remember Peter’s admonishment — “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander” (1 Peter 2:1).

Paul did not allow himself to be discouraged by the discouragers. He knew there were “others” who ministered “out of good will.” Such individuals had good intentions.¹³ Their motives were more pure. No one serves Christ from a completely pure heart, since we are all tainted by sin. However, Paul knew there were some who had better motives in ministering. As a result, he didn’t despair because of the critics who delighted in his imprisonment.

Paul’s words in verse fifteen remind us of the need to stay strong in the face of those who might discourage our attempts at gospel ministry. There will always be critics and complainers. A segment of people will play the comparison game until Christ returns (2 Corinthians 10:12). The faithful accept such things to a degree. They understand that fallen humanity will taint the work of the church until the end of time. They don’t allow their vision to be detoured by discouragers who are ensnared in the comparison and complaining traps.

¹¹ Martin, 78.

¹² Robertson, [CD-Rom].

¹³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].