

Series: The Church — A People with A Purpose

Title: What We Need Now

Text: Philippians 1:16-20

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Verse 16

Paul continued his discussion regarding his supporters in verse 16, saying, “These preach out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.” The believers in Rome who stood by Paul’s side were motivated by the greatest of all Christian virtues — “love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). They lived by Christ’s Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39), knowing that love was the means of fulfilling all of God’s Law (Matthew 22:40). Because they placed Paul above themselves (Matthew 7:12), they treated him with proper dignity and respect. They recognized that the Lord had appointed him to be a powerful gospel missionary (Acts 9:6). Consequently, they did not use his imprisonment as an occasion to slander him, as others did (Philippians 1:17).

Paul’s supporters knew he had been “appointed for the defense of the gospel.” The word rendered “defense” was the Greek word *apología*, the word from which we get our term “apology.” It depicted the act of one giving “an answer or speech in defense of oneself.”¹ Usually, the term was used of a defense before a judicial accusation.² It spoke of the legal act wherein one provided a defense for a defendant.³ In the ancient world, such pleas were often given to a tribunal or other legal court (Acts 22:1; 2 Timothy 4:16).⁴

From the word *apología* an academic and theological discipline has emerged. It is known as “apologetics.” The field of study is an “endeavor to provide a reasoned account of the grounds for believing in the Christian faith.”⁵ Some may see such efforts as being unnecessary, as nothing more than a new-fangled fad designed to make Christianity mesh with a deceived and depraved world. Many cry foul, arguing that the gospel doesn’t need defending. The words of Charles Spurgeon have often been used to support such a position. The great preacher of London once likened the preaching of the gospel to releasing a lion from a cage, saying, “...the best ‘apology’ for the gospel is to let the gospel out.”⁶

While it is true that the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16), it is also true that God’s people have a responsibility to give a “defense” of the gospel. It

¹ Zodhiates, 232.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 448.

³ Martin, 80.

⁴ Zodhiates, 232.

⁵ McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 15.

⁶ Spurgeon, C.H. *The New Park Street and Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: 1886, Volume 32*. (Pilgrim Publications, 1969), from “Christ and His Co-Workers,” preached on June 10, 1886.

is worth noting that the Greek word rendered “defense” was used by Peter in one of his letters. He applied the term to all believers by saying, “...but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Every believer is called to the task of apologetics. However, Paul’s example teaches us that Christ and Christ’s gospel is foremost in such activity. One has said:

The crowning argument in Christian Evidences for the existence of God is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the uninventable Saviour, promised in Old Testament prophecies, revealed in his miraculous birth, displayed through his extraordinary signs with his power over creation, over the god of this world, over disease and death, and also supremely in his astounding teaching - no man ever spake like him — declaring his authority, his claims, his promises. The greatest proof for the existence of God is the life and teaching and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁷

At the time of the writing of the letter to the Philippians, Paul was certainly focused on his legal defense before Roman courts. However, he was more focused on his defense of the gospel. He knew he was ordained to be a defender of Christian truth (Romans 1:1; Corinthians 15:9-10). Paul had mentioned his specially-appointed role in defending the gospel earlier in his letter to the Philippians. In 1:7, he spoke of his “...defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

Many in Rome (the city in which Paul was incarcerated) recognized that Paul was a true apostle of Christ. They did not fall prey to detractor’s who doubted his apostleship (1 Corinthians 9:1). Knowing that the Lord had set him apart for a special gospel ministry (Galatians 2:7), they joined him in preaching Christ. Paul said they proclaimed the message of Jesus “out of love.” Some translations render the original language as speaking of “good will.” Paul’s thought was that the faithful evangelists in Rome didn’t harbor petter jealousy as others did. They weren’t caught up in a carnal spirit of competition with the apostle (Philippians 1:15). Their motives in sharing the gospel were rooted in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). They preached the love of God (1 John 4:8) from a heart of love (John 13:34).

There is a need for a revival of the gospel faithfulness seen in Philippians 1:16. Perhaps like never before, the human condition requires warm-hearted evangelists who preach the “truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). We need more people like Paul and the people of whom he spoke. In a world in which it seems most “have an itch to hear what they want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3), and in a world in which so many peddle Christian doctrines in a spirit of contempt and self-aggrandizement (Philippians 1:15), may the Lord raise up a host of individuals who lovingly “contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (Jude 1:3).

⁷ Thomas, Geoff. Evidence that God Is. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*: 705, June 2022. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 12.

Verse 17

After making mention of his supporters in verse 16, Paul turned his attention to his detractors once again. He said, “others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, thinking that they will cause me trouble in my imprisonment” (Philippians 1:17). The “others” of verse 17 were the same ones who preached Christ “out of envy and rivalry” (Philippians 1:15). The Greek word rendered “selfish ambition” in verse 17 was a near synonym to the one translated “rivalry” in verse 15. It literally meant “to serve for hire.”⁸ In the ancient world, it referred to one who worked only for the purpose of being paid.⁹ Such a person had little loyalty to his or her master, and such a person didn’t have much zeal for his or her work.

Paul used the language to depict the driving motivation of his critics. They were led by a spirit of self-centeredness. Instead of ministering from the motives of the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40), as Paul’s supporters did (Philippians 1:16), such individuals ministered from the motive of self-love. They wanted to make Paul look bad and they wanted to make themselves look great. The apostle would provide a rebuke for such baser motives later in his letter. Using the same Greek terminology found in verse 17, he would say, “Do nothing out of *selfish ambition* or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3).

Because of their self-love, the self-driven preachers of Paul’s day didn’t serve Christ “sincerely.” The idea of the text is that their ministry emanated from “mixed and impure motives.”¹⁰ Christians are called to labor for the Lord with a “simplicity of Spirit.”¹¹ Jesus taught as much in Matthew 6:22-23. Despite our Lord’s instruction, Paul’s opponents raged in self-conceit. While the lowly apostle was chained to elite soldiers, they scoffed, using his imprisonment as a platform for personal promotion.

Their hope was that they would “cause” the apostle “trouble,” but they underestimated the man’s spiritual resiliency. He had learned the secret of Christian contentment (Philippians 4:12). Whether criticized, abandoned, hungry, desolate, or in need, Paul knew how to find joy in the Lord. He would later testify, “I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

Many believe Paul’s opponents were Judaizers.¹² Maybe they didn’t like the letter he had sent to the church at Rome. Perhaps they felt some of the pronouncements within it minimized the Lord’s promises to Israel (Romans 10:21; 11:25). Others propose that Paul’s opponents were prosperity-driven preachers. Perhaps they were of the same stripe of the teachers Paul had to rebuke in 1 Timothy 6:3-10. Maybe they were put off by Paul’s imprisonment, supposing it was evidence of divine disfavor. Whatever the case, Paul didn’t despair because of his chains or his critics. He knew that all his circumstances were ordained by God (Romans 8:28-30). He realized that the Lord would use his fetters and his enemies for a purpose.

⁸ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 172.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 449.

¹⁰ Robertson, 439.

¹¹ Zodhiates, 74.

¹² Robertson, 439.

Verse 18

After describing the two different groups of people who had two different perspectives concerning his ministry, Paul made the following pronouncement — “What does it matter? Only that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). The question “What does it matter?” is a good English translation. However, one could probably render it in a more abrupt or direct fashion. Perhaps Paul’s intent was to say something similar to our modern “So what?” For Paul, people’s personal perspective on his ministry weren’t the most pressing concern. For Him, gospel proclamation was what was most paramount.

Paul admitted that some served Christ from “false motives.” Such individuals had a veneer of godliness. By all accounts, they were good people who did a lot for the sake of Christ. Inwardly, however, they were driven by selfish motives. The things of God were used as a pretext for the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Paul himself didn’t serve in such a way. In 1 Thessalonians 2:5-6, he testified, “For we never used flattering speech, as you know, or had greedy motives — God is our witness— and we didn’t seek glory from people, either from you or from others.” Though Paul sought to keep his motives pure, he was aware that others didn’t. Those in Rome who gloated because of his imprisonment were driven by a selfish desire for prominence and prestige within the church.

Fortunately, others in Rome served from loftier notions. They were driven by a more pure desire for the glory of Christ and gospel advancement. Paul described their motives as being “true.” The Greek word underlying English translations is the common word used of “truth” in the New Testament (John 8:32; 14:6). As used in the context of Philippians 1:18, it depicted that which was in alignment with God’s standards of truth and holiness. It depicted the quality of sincerity.¹³

Paul surely preferred for people to serve Christ out of more sincere motives, but he wasn’t undone by those who served from baser motives. His chief concern was that Christ was “proclaimed.” The Greek word translated “proclaimed” was a compound one. It was made up of two Greek words. The first was the preposition that meant “according to” (*katá*). The second was the verb used to describe the act of a messenger (*aggéllō*). It was closely related to the word used for angels. In Bible times, angels were regarded primarily as being messengers from the Lord, commissioned to share important divine announcements with humanity (Matthew 1:20-21).

Paired with the preposition *katá*, the term closely related to that for angels gave the sense of one making a strong announcement. It meant “to declare, plainly, openly, or aloud.”¹⁴ For Paul, such a broadcasting of the gospel was what was most important. He didn’t have time to become unhealthily focused on what others thought about him or said about him. When he heard about the venomous attacks of his

¹³ Zodhiates, 120.

¹⁴ Zodhiates, 827.

opponents from a Roman jail cell, his response was, “So what?” He only wanted Christ to be proclaimed.

Despite what critics may have said, Paul even rejoiced to hear that they preached the gospel. He said, “... in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). Rejoicing was one of Paul’s foremost themes in his letter to the Philippians. Verse 18 contains the first reference to the verb. More references will follow in Philippians 2:17, 18, 28; 3:1; 4:4, 10. The act involves the experience of Christian gladness. Because of Paul’s frequent mention of rejoicing, some call the letter “The Epistle of Joy.” For now, it is important to note that the proclamation of the gospel was a foremost source of joy in the apostle’s life. His ministry wasn’t driven by quests for prominence or prestige. He wasn’t detoured by personal attacks. As he sat chained to Roman soldiers, his first aspiration was for Christ to be proclaimed everywhere.

Paul’s perspective needs to be reclaimed by the twenty-first century church. The darkness and deception of fallen society are increasing. False philosophies abound and moral decline is rampant. All the while, many Christians are divided because of petty disagreements and personal preferences. Sure, there are reasons for division and separation, but much division in the church nowadays is over minuscule and meaningless things. As it was with Paul’s opponents, pride-driven motives are the real culprit in many cases. The sad reality is that gospel advancement often stalls because many don’t make Paul’s aim their chief aim. If the church is to make a resurgence within society, it must cultivate a perspective like the one Paul had. Gospel proclamation must be priority number one.

Verse 19

Concerning his trials, Paul said, “...because I know this will lead to my salvation, through your prayers and help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:19). It seems the apostle knew he would be released from prison. Perhaps he had received direct revelation from God about such things. In his letter to the Philippians, he would later hint at how he had received special revelations concerning his future (Philippians 1:25; 2:24).

The Lord had shown Paul that a certain “this” would lead to his “deliverance.” What is the “this” of what he spoke? As it appears in verse 19, it seems the pronoun points to the latter half of the verse. More specifically, it is intended as a reference to the “prayers” of the Philippians and the “help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” Paul knew the Philippians were praying for him, and he knew their intercessory prayers would be used to secure his release. The apostle had surely heard tell of the miraculous way in which prayers had opened prison doors for Peter (Acts 12:6-19). He knew the Philippians’ supplications on his behalf would secure a similar result.

Already in his letter, the apostle had spoke of his own prayers on behalf of the believers at Philippi (Philippians 1:9-11). Now he made mention of how they had prayed for him. Both instances remind us of the power and primacy of intercessory prayer in the Christian life. God’s people are called to pray for God’s people. The New Testament instructs us to “...pray for one another...” (James 5:16). There are innumerable blessings and benefits of such spiritual activity. The life of Job gives testimony (Job 42:10).

Ultimately, however, it was the Holy Spirit who would move government officials, soldiers, and others to secure Paul's freedom. Both human and divine agencies would play a part in the apostle's liberation. In speaking of the "help" of the Holy Spirit, Paul employed a word that was often used in the ancient world to speak of how ligaments in the human body provide support to various bones by connecting them to one another (Ephesians 4:16). Used figuratively and spiritually in our text, the term picturesquely depicted the way in which the Holy Spirit supernaturally works to support and strengthen believers in their times of need. The Third Person of the Trinity is the church's ever-present helper. In ways beyond human detection and comprehension, He brings the power, provision, protection, and presence of God to the lives of God's people.

Divine revelation had made it plain that Paul would be delivered via human prayer and the Spirit's working. Interestingly, the apostle used a word translated "salvation" to speak of his release. The same term is used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of the spiritual salvation Jesus provides (Luke 1:69; Romans 1:16). Paul didn't have such a spiritual salvation in mind, however. He had already been born again. His focus was on a physical salvation or deliverance. It seems the apostle quoted the Septuagint's (LXX) rendering of Job 13:16 — "Yes, this will result in my deliverance, for no godless person can appear before him." Paul's point was that he knew he would be released from prison soon. Though his critics used his imprisonment as a platform for casting aspersions on his ministry, he would promptly return to his missionary endeavors. The prayers of God's people and the power of the Holy Spirit would guarantee it.

Verse 20

Paul continued to talk about his release, saying, "My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be ashamed about anything, but that now as always, with all courage, Christ will be highly honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Philippians 1:20). The apostle used strong language to speak of his anticipations for the future. The word rendered "eager expectation" literally spoke of one stretching his or head forward.¹⁵ When used figuratively, it portrayed one waiting on another person, place, or thing. The same term was used in the Septuagint's rendering of Psalm 37:7 — "Be silent before the Lord and wait expectantly for him; do not be agitated by one who prospers in his way, by the person who carries out evil plans." Paul certainly needed the same frame of mind as the Psalmist. He had numerous detractors in the church at Rome. Maybe he had the words of Psalm 37:7 in mind as he wrote to the Philippians. He was personally aware that he needed to wait on the Lord's deliverance.

Paul also used the concept of "hope" to speak of his future release from prison. The Greek term underlying English translations is one used in reference to one of the most famous Christian virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13). Modern people often think of hope as a desire tainted by a degree of doubt. Some speak of how they hope it doesn't rain or how they hope nothing bad happens. In the vernacular of the New Testament, hope isn't a wishy-washy type of thing. Instead, it involves a confident expectation in a divinely promised future. By coupling "hope" with "eager

¹⁵ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 67.

expectation,” Paul placed double emphasis on his certainty concerning his future release.

Though there were many shame-invoking believers in Rome who scoffed at Paul because of his imprisonment, he professed he would soon “not be ashamed about anything.” The language of the text spoke of one being “disgraced” or “defeated.”¹⁶ The carnal and unspiritual attempted to pile on because of Paul’s predicament, but Paul knew his release would soon justify him. His critics would be proved wrong. The apostle would go on preaching “with all boldness,” embodying the same boldness he saw in some of the believers at Rome (Philippians 1:14).

Interestingly, the word translated “boldness” in our verse is the same one used of the early church in Acts 4:29. Paul knew that boldness is the ever-present need of believers who aim to fulfill the Great Commission. As such, he made a prayer request for such boldness when writing to the church at Ephesus: “Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19).

Paul’s end game in gospel ministry was not his own ego or his personal advancement. His critics in the church at Rome at the church of Rome preached Christ “out of envy and rivalry” (Philippians 1:15), but he preached primarily so that Christ would be “highly honored.” The language of Philippians 1:20 was often used of something being enlarged or magnified. It contained the word from which we get our word “mega.” Figuratively, the language referred to one showing respect to another person.¹⁷ As Paul looked forward to release from imprisonment, he had no designs on getting even with those who had ridiculed him. He simply wanted to return to his missions ministry. His focus was on making Christ’s name great.

Such is the the purpose of the church — to magnify Christ on the Earth. The book of Acts gives witness to such. It uses the same language from Philippians 1:20 to speak of how the first Christians were busy “declaring the greatness of God” (Acts 10:46). It also used the same language to tell of how the early church was zealous that “the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high esteem” (Acts 19:17). The contemporary church can learn a lot from the early church and Paul. Our first passion should be knowing Christ and making Him known. It should be our unending aim to magnify His name in all the Earth. Considering the state of human society, now is not the time to become divided over personal preferences or petty disagreements. The glory of Christ should be our driving ambition.

¹⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 38.

¹⁷ Zodhiates, 951.