

Series: The Church — A People with A Purpose

Title: The Mindset that Makes a Difference

Text: Philippians 1:21-26

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Verse 21

In verse 21, Paul transitioned to talk about the frame of mind he possessed toward the believers in Philippi. He said, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” The apostle’s language referred to his manner of life, the way in which he passed his existence.¹ One Greek scholar has said that Paul’s words depicted his “own view in living.”²

According to Paul, his days were spent on Christ. His Lord was the centerpiece of his existence, his purpose in living. He knew he was alive because of Jesus and for Jesus. He would have wholeheartedly agreed with the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s assertion that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The apostle lived with the conviction that Christ should carry the most weight in one’s life.

Paul expressed such a conviction elsewhere in the New Testament. When writing to the Galatians, he said, “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live for God...” (Galatians 2:19). In addition to his own commitment, Paul encouraged other believers to cultivate a similar frame of mind. He saw Christ as being the predominating principle for the lives of all Christians. He told the Romans, “If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Romans 14:8). When writing to the Colossians, he flatly said, “Christ...is your life” (Colossians 3:4). In 2 Corinthians, he indicated that Jesus should be the priority of the Christian life. His rationale was based on Jesus’ death. He said, “And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Paul regarded the Lord Jesus as the primary purpose for the believer’s existence. He didn’t have the frame of mind of many modern believers. He didn’t see Jesus as a simple add-on, a periphery activity for a cluttered life. The things of the Lord weren’t an a-la-carte type of thing, merely a side addition to accompany other escapades. Jesus wasn’t one priority alongside a plethora of others. Instead, Christ was the filter through which all of Paul’s other life activities passed. Christ’s gospel, Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40), and Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), were the framework for all he did. Jesus wasn’t just a priority in his life; Jesus was *the* priority in his life.

Seek to cultivate the perspective Paul possessed. Aim to find your life identity and purpose in Jesus. The Christian’s life is to be driven by the person and precepts of Christ, not a hobby, a vocation, material possessions, worldly accolades, earthly relationship, or even human-centered religious advancement. John Calvin said, “We ought to be ashamed to think less of those things on which God places such value

¹ Zodhiates, 697-698.

² Robertson, 440.

than we do of this present life's shadowy and fleeting pleasures.”³ Can you say with Paul, “For me, to live is Christ?”

Paul demonstrated the depth of his passion for Christ by saying, “...to die is gain.” The apostle's assertion was likely rooted in the prospect of his future martyrdom. Shackled to soldiers from the Emperor's Praetorian Guard and awaiting his trial in Rome (Philippians 1:12-13), Paul was aware that a death penalty was a real possibility. Consequently, his mention of death in Philippians 1:21 did not refer to a natural death. He had execution in mind.⁴

We've already discovered from Philippians 1:19 that Paul had received some sort of divine revelation that told him his trial would not end in death. However, he still relished in the thought of being with Christ. He referred to the act of physical death as “gain.” The Greek of the original text referred to a “profit” or advantage.”⁵ It was actually a technical term from the first-century world that referred to interest gained through business investments. Paul used the language in a figurative and spiritual sense. For him, physical death would have provided him the opportunity “to cash in both principal and interest and have more of Christ than when living.”⁶

Before he was born-again, Paul viewed earthly achievement and accomplishments as the essence of real living (Philippians 3:7). After he was converted, his perspective changed. He began to see death as gain, since death would result in immediate transport into the presence of Christ (Luke 16:22; 23:43). He spoke of such realities in his second letter to the Corinthians, saying, “In fact, we are confident, and we would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul also saw death as a benefit in his situation, because he knew it would provide a powerful testimony for the gospel.⁷ Remember his words from Philippians 1:12-14. If the Roman authorities killed Paul, he knew other believers would likely be prompted to share the gospel more zealously and faithfully. Perhaps his life would function like a seed going into the ground, dying, and bringing forth a gospel harvest (John 12:24).

Verse 22

In verse 22, Paul contemplated the benefit of continuing his earthly life. He said, “Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don't know which one I should choose” (Philippians 1:22). The word rendered “flesh,” as used in the context of Philippians 1:22, did not refer to the fallen or sinful part of humanity. The New Testament frequently used the term in such a way (Romans 8:5; Galatians 5:16; 1 John 2:16). However, Paul used it within his discussion of life and death to simply speak of his physical body. He didn't mean to imply anything in a moral sense. The New

³ Calvin, John. *A Little Book on the Christian Life*. (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2017), 74.

⁴ Martin, 84.

⁵ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 229.

⁶ Robertson, 440.

⁷ Martin, 84.

Testament often used the term rendered “flesh” to simply speak of the mortal human body (2 Corinthians 4:11; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter 4:2).⁸ Such was Paul’s intent behind the word in our current verse. He knew dying would teleport him into the manifest presence of God, but remaining in his physical body would result in good for the gospel and the Great Commission.

The eternal state seemed appealing, but there was still “fruitful work for” the apostle. He was aware that “a continued life means a continued ministry.”⁹ Thus, he did not have a self-oriented perspective that wanted to depart for heaven earlier than necessary. He wanted to remain for the benefit and blessing of others. He wanted his life to be spent for the upbuilding of Christ’s kingdom.

However, another part of Paul still wanted to depart and be with the Lord. He said, “I don’t know which one I should choose.” The original language of the text depicted competed desires raging within the soul of the apostle. Within our text, one can see a struggle of opposites that could be compared to the struggle Paul spoke of in Romans 7:14-25. Though the circumstances were different in this instance, Paul was indeed in a crisis. His soul was conflicted. He knew the final decision wasn’t his to make, but he struggled between a desire to go and be with Christ and a desire to remain and minister the gospel to others.

Verse 23

Paul’s competing desires placed him in a predicament. On one hand, he wanted to stay on Earth. On the other hand, he wanted to go and be with Christ. He said, “I am torn between the two. I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better” (Philippians 1:23). The word translated “torn” is one that could be rendered “pressured.” It figuratively depicted a person being pulled in two opposite directions. It was used in the ancient world of one having conflicting thoughts, or of one facing a tough decision.¹⁰ In modern terminology, some people sometimes speak of being “between a rock and a hard place.” Perhaps Paul’s language was similar to such a metaphor. As he awaited news concerning his legal verdict, he was pulled between desires to be with Christ or minister to the Philippians.

Though he saw the benefit of staying to minister to others, Paul was desirous to be in the presence of God, and subsequently free from earthly problems and pains of life on fallen Earth. In fact, he flatly said being with God would have been “far better.” In the original language of the text, he used a triple comparative. The text literally reads, “very far better.”¹¹ Maybe you’ve heard someone describe something as being “very, very, very good.” Paul used such superlative language to depict the blessedness of being in the Third Heaven, a place he had visited through an apostolic revelation (2 Corinthians 12:2), and a place Jesus called “Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Though it would have been a tough decision, and even though it wasn’t even his

⁸ Zodhiates, 1280.

⁹ Martin, 85.

¹⁰ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 37.

¹¹ Robertson, 441.

decision to make, Paul would have chosen to go to heaven if he was given the choice. He would have faced Roman execution with a degree of joy, knowing that it was a conduit to the wonderful presence of God (Psalm 16:11; 84:1-4).

It is important to note that Paul wasn't possessed by a fatalistic spiritual devotion. He did not have a death wish and he wasn't suicidal. He was simply zealous for the eternal state. As a mature Christian, he realized that the fleeting world system isn't as dazzling as some make it out to be.

Healthy believers look forward to the day in which their faith will be made sight. They don't live for the fleeting excitements of this world. Though their feet are on Earth, their heads and hearts are in heaven. They live by the mantra expressed in a simple praise song — "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue." Paul encouraged such a frame of mind when writing to the Colossians — "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3).

Verse 24

Though he was conflicted, Paul knew the Lord wanted him to stay on Earth for the benefit of the church. He told the Philippians, "... but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake" (Philippians 1:24). Through divine revelation, the apostle had learned that his Roman imprisonment would not end with capital punishment (Philippians 1:19). The Lord had made it plain, through some means unknown to us, that it was "necessary" for him to go on living. The word translated "necessary" depicted a need. Used in the context of Paul's discussion, it referred to spiritual necessities. The apostle knew that the Philippians had numerous spiritual deficiencies (Philippians 2:1-4; 3:2-6; 4:1-4). Other churches he had planted were weak and sickly as well. The apostle lived with a deep burden for the healthy and vitality of such congregations (2 Corinthians 11:28). Consequently, when the Lord revealed that he would go on living, he concluded that it was for the sake of ministry. He had the conviction that he was to stay on Earth for the sake of equipping, edifying, and encouraging God's people.

Verse 25

Paul further expressed his purpose in remaining by saying, "Since I am persuaded of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith..." (Philippians 1:25). As indicated elsewhere (Philippians 1:19, 24), the Lord had made Paul personally aware that his legal trial would result in his release from prison. He would "remain and continue" with God's people.

Part of God's purpose in keeping Paul alive was for the "progress" of the Philippians. The same Greek term found in verse 25 was also used back in Philippians 1:17 to speak of the way the gospel had advanced through Paul's missionary efforts. Paul used the same term in his first letter to Timothy to speak of his desire for his spiritual protege to mature spiritually (1 Timothy 4:15). In his letter to the Philippians, he would later speak of how he had a similar desire for them (Philippians 2:12; 3:13-14).

In the context of our current verse, the word “progress” was used in reference to the Philippians’ “faith.” Though it can sometimes refer to a subjective trust in the Lord (Mark 9:24; Ephesians 2:8; Romans 1:17), the term “faith” is often used in the New Testament in an objective sense. Used in such a way, the term speaks of the content of Christian faith and practice (Jude 1:3). Paul knew that many in Philippi needed to be more grounded in the truth of Christ (Philippians 1:9-11). He also knew he was appointed by the Lord for helping people grow in the faith; consequently, he realized it was God’s will for him to remain on Earth.

Paul was also concerned with the Philippians’ “joy.” Such virtue involved an inner-contentment that came from a close relationship with Christ. It was a continual theme in the apostle’s letter (Philippians 1:4, 18; 2:2, 29; 3:1; 4:1, 4). He knew strange doctrine and petty divisions had robbed the church of its spiritual enthusiasm. Consequently, he felt he was to stay with the Philippians so that they might recapture a spirit of spiritual rejoicing.

Verse 26

Paul spoke of the reason why he would stay and invest in the Philippians’ faith and joy. He said, “...so that, because of my coming to you again, your boasting in Christ Jesus may abound” (Philippians 1:26). According to the apostle, the church’s “boasting in Christ Jesus” would “abound” because of his ministry. For most, the act of “boasting” is regarded as sinful. It is important to note that Paul used the concept in a holy and healthy way. The Greek word underlying English translations was used elsewhere in Paul’s letter to speak of a selfish, man-centered, and worldly type of braggadocios behavior (Philippians 2:1-4; 4:1-2).

Boasting can be either good or bad. Paul employed the same term in different ways within his writing. Sometimes he used it negatively; other times he used it positively. His point was that he wanted the Philippians to boast in the right type of things. In Philippians 3:3, he said, “For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh.” Paul was one who boasted in the Lord (Galatians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 1:31), and he wanted the Philippians to do the same. The confidence in Christ of which Paul spoke is a hallmark of spiritual maturity. Strong believers don’t place confidence in natural human abilities (Philippians 2:2) or religious achievement (Philippians 3:1-3).

Paul knew he would visit the Philippians again. He spoke of “coming to you again.” He would later mention a future visit a second time (Philippians 2:24). It is unknown whether or not Paul got to see the Philippians before he died. However, his words in our verse seem to indicate he was convinced that he would visit them again. When he saw them, he hoped he would find believers who had progressed in the Christian faith, joy, and confidence. It was for the sake of such things that he would not die and his ministry would continue.

Paul’s testimony provides an example for us. Though we may not be called to be apostles, to plant churches, or to write large portions of Scripture, God has something he wants each of us to do. We are a part of the body of Christ for a reason (1 Corinthians 12:12). We’ve each been given spiritual gifts that are to be employed for the edification and encouragement of others (Romans 12:6-8). In what capacity are you serving Christ and His church? Are you investing in others? Have you discipled

anyone recently? Develop the perspective of Paul. As long as you are on Earth, the Lord has you here to make a difference in the lives of others!