

Series: To Live is Christ
Title: Witnessing for Christ
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Verse 14

In verse 14, Paul continued his appeal concerning Christian sanctification by saying, “Do everything without grumbling and arguing” (Philippians 2:14). The apostle knew that the church at Philippi was marred by a spirit of negativity to some degree. Some amongst the fellowship were engaging in unhealthy forms of criticism and fault finding. After having just talked about the soul work required for spiritual growth (Philippians 2:12-13), Paul pointed out specific sins in the congregation. If the Philippians committed themselves to working out their salvation (Philippians 2:12), the sanctifying power of Christ (Philippians 2:13) would make negative virtues like “grumbling and arguing” diminish.

Paul’s admonition in verse 14 revealed that real spiritual growth always results in real, outward displays of grace. Some within the church boasted of perfectionism (Philippians 3:12), but their practical lifestyles weren’t too commendable. Paul wanted all to be aware — spiritual progress is measured by life change. If the believers at Philippi were advancing in godliness, instances of “grumbling and arguing” would diminish.

It is worth considering the nature of the two vices Paul mentioned. The first — “grumbling” — got its name from a first-century onomatopoeia. An onomatopoeia is a literary device in which a word makes a sound to depict an act or object. In English, words like “meow,” “splat,” “swish,” “honk,” “buzz,” and “boom” are onomatopoeic in nature. In the original language of our text, Paul used a Greek word that sounded like “goggusmós.” The term made low, guttural sounds. It portrayed a murmuring grumble.¹ First-century people used the word to speak of communicate actions that stirred up ill will.² Through goggusmós, a person commonly expressed dissatisfaction concerning a person, place, or thing.

The second sin Paul exposed was that of “arguing.” Such activity was likely associated with the “grumbings” Paul previously mentioned. The word “arguing” referred to “skeptical questioning and criticism of others.” Luke used the term in his gospel to speak of contention between the original twelve disciples. In Luke 9:46, we read, “An argument started among them about who was the greatest of them.” Perhaps the Philippians had a problem similar to that of the first disciples. Maybe desires for prominence and prestige in the church had provoked people to argumentative behavior.

It is important to note that Paul’s concern wasn’t with healthy disagreements. His words shouldn’t be interpreted as a wholesale discussion of constructive feedback in the church. It is permissible for believers to express differences of perspective in a healthy way. Not all feedback or criticism should be regarded as negative or sinful. In fact, Paul’s own words in Philippians 2:14 were a form of criticism. If the apostle was against all forms of disagreement, he would have never written the letters he wrote. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul told of how He once confronted Peter. He actually “opposed him to his face” (Galatians 1:10). Peter’s hypocrisy toward Gentile believers necessitated such a confrontation. Not all disagreement in the church is of the sinful sort.

Paul’s concern was with ugly, unhealthy types of grumbings (“goggusmós”) that sometimes marks God’s people. In addition, he was worried about the pride-driven arguing that sometimes appears in local congregations. Slandorous speech and sinful competitiveness were apparent problems in Philippi (Philippians 2:1-4; 4:1-3). The presence of such spiritual toxins proved that some in the congregations needed spiritual maturing. If each would commit to “work out” their salvation, such sins would begin to die and diminish in the church.

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 452.

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 452.

Verse 15

In verse 15, Paul gave the rationale for his command from verse 14 by saying, "...so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world" (Philippians 2:15). The first words of verse 15 were words that denoted purpose in the Koine Greek language. They revealed why Paul encouraged effort at spiritual growth (Philippians 2:12-13) and abstinence from certain sins (Philippians 2:14). All of Paul's talk about spiritual growth wasn't just mere religious talk. He knew that advancement in godliness served a real purpose in God's plan. When God's people grow in Christ-likeness (Philippians 2:12-13), repenting of relational sins that stain most of the world (Philippians 2:14), their lives stand out as stark witnesses for Jesus.

The word "blameless" in verse 15 did not refer to perfection. Some of Paul's readers boasted of perfection (Philippians 3:12), but Paul knew that none can arrive at such a state until the final phases of salvation is accomplished — glorification (Romans 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55). Instead of calling believers to sinless perfectionism, Paul encouraged blamelessness. The word referred to a lifestyle that was free from any major fault. I once heard a preacher say that blamelessness can be compared to teflon — though some may make accusations against such a person, nothing sticks! Perhaps there was a play on words in Paul's teaching. By avoiding a spirit of fault finding (Philippians 2:14), believers at Philippi would live free of any major fault (Philippians 2:15). Consequently, they would provide a radiant witness for Jesus.

On top of blamelessness, Paul also said purity would be a result of repentance concerning inner-relational sins. The Greek word rendered "pure" in verse 15 was used of unalloyed metals in the first-century world.³ It literally meant "unmixed." It was used in the ancient world in reference to undiluted wine. Jews used it to speak of things that were ceremonially clean.⁴ In Matthew 10:16, Jesus used the term in dispatching the Twelve for gospel ministry: "Look, I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves." As used by both Paul and Jesus, the term reveals that moral purity is a prerequisite for gospel witnessing. Believers must have lives that are "unmixed" with the ways of the world if they want to be witnesses for Christ.

Paul reminded his readers of their calling to missions and evangelism. While they bickered and battled, the Lord wanted to use them as lights in a dark world. Paul spoke of unregenerate humanity as "a crooked and perverted generation." The apostle's language surely seems stout to modern ears. Few Christians nowadays would dare use such terminology to speak of unredeemed society. However, Paul's language revealed the truth about those who don't know Christ. It is right to call the world "crooked," since dishonest people and deceptive philosophies abound.

In addition, it is not wrong to call unredeemed humanity "perverted." The term, as used by Paul, simply spoke of that which was morally twisted and misled. Since the first sin in the Garden of Eden, humanity has been plagued by twisted social norms that go against God's plan for humankind. Sure, there have been seasons in which societies have successfully suppressed unrighteousness to a degree. Heightened degrees of morality have gained sway from time to time. However, Earth has been under the sway of Satan since the first sin. He, the prince of this world (John 14:30), leads a crooked and perverted world system that coaxes many to live by his worthless values (1 John 2:16).

When Christians "work out" (Philippians 2:12-13) their salvation and turn from ungodly patterns of living (Philippians 2:14), their lives stand out as being "faultless" in a godless world. Once again, Paul's language did not refer to perfection. Perhaps he was being a little tongue and cheek with those who espoused sinless perfectionism (Philippians 3:12). Instead of calling

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 452-453.

⁴ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 40.

for perfection, Paul encouraged faultlessness. The virtue involved a lifestyle concerning which no one could pass a critical verdict.⁵ Believers will never achieve perfection in this life (1 John 3:1-2); however, they can pursue spiritual maturity. Such a pursuit will cause virtues like honesty, humility, and holiness to grow. The end result will be a “faultless” state before a lost world. Peter upheld these same realities in one of his letters, saying, “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits” (1 Peter 2:12).

On top of being “faultless,” spiritual growth would have also led the Philippians to “shine like stars in the world.” Perhaps Paul had the words of Jesus in mind when he wrote Philippians 2:15. In the famous Sermon on the Mount, our Lord said, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). According to both Paul and Jesus, holy living provides a bright and radiant witness for Jesus. Gospel realities are often best seen through changed lives. Though believers are in the world (John 17:18), they shouldn’t be a part of it (John 15:19; 17:16). Unbelieving society is “crooked and perverted,” but Christians are to be faultless. Such faultlessness is actualized through God’s ordained means of spiritual progress. When believers seek spiritual growth (Philippians 2:12-13) and repent of indwelling sin (Philippians 2:14), the Lord will use them to magnify his name in all the Earth (Philippians 2:15).

Verse 16

Paul continued his discussion concerning the Philippians’ witness by saying, “...by holding firm to the word of life. Then I can boast in the day of Christ that I didn’t run or labor for nothing” (Philippians 2:16). The apostles’ words revealed that the Word of God is to be the focus of Christian evangelism. The Greek term used for “word” was the word *lógos*. It referred to a “message.” It was famously used of Jesus, the incarnate Word, in John 1:1. Throughout the New Testament, the term was frequently used in reference to God’s specially revealed truth (John 17:17; Colossians 3:6; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:23; 1 Peter 3:1; 2 Peter 1:19; 1 John 1:1, 2:5). Through a process known as “special revelation,” the Lord gave special revelation of Himself through prophets and apostles (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Such revelation is now preserved for us in the Bible. The focal point of all special revelation is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such was “the word” Paul wanted the Philippians to share with others.

Paul qualified the nature of the word the Philippians were to proclaim by calling it “the word of life.” His qualifier pointed to the fact that the gospel message contains life-imparting truth. In fact, Scripture reveals that the Word of God is actually alive in a spiritual sense. The author of Hebrews said, “For the word of God is *living* and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Since God’s Word is endowed with supernatural life, it has the ability to impart life to those who hear it (Romans 5:16, 8:10, 10:17). It is for this reason that Paul 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). Without a doubt, Christians have a special message to share.

Considering these things, Paul urged the Philippians to be committed to “holding firm” to the Word of God. His language was used in the first-century world to speak of the activity of servants. In particular, it often portrayed servants serving food or wine at a banquet.⁶ Paul used the term figuratively to depict the church’s role in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). God’s people are called to serve the world by holding out the gospel and offering it to others.

If the Philippians would be faithful to share the message of Christ with others, Paul knew he would be able to “...boast in the day of Christ that...” he “...didn’t run or labor for

⁵ Martin, 122.

⁶ Walvoord and Zuck, 656.

nothing” (Philippians 2:16). The “day” of which Paul spoke was none other than the day of Christ’s judgment. Most likely, the apostle had the Judgment Seat of Christ in mind, the judgment specially reserved for believers. At such a judgment, God’s children’t will be judged in reference to their service for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). They won’t be judged in regard to sin or salvation, as unbelievers will be at another judgement called “The Great White Throne Judgment” (Revelation 20:11-15).

At the Judgment Seat of Christ, Paul wanted to be able “to boast.” His desire was not for a sinful, braggadocios type of bragging. Instead, he wanted to be able to spiritually boast in a holy and healthy type of way. Paul knew the truth of Jeremiah 9:24 — “But the one who boasts should boast in this: that he understands and knows me—that I am the Lord, showing faithful love, justice, and righteousness on the earth, for I delight in these things. This is the Lord’s declaration.” Sure, selfish boasting is off limits for the child of God; however, it is right for God’s people to glory in the things of the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:31).

In regard to boasting before the Lord, Paul wanted to be able to boast that he didn’t “run or labor for nothing.” The words “run” and “labor” are used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of Christian living and Christian service. Together, they indicated that Christian consecration and ministry often require perseverance and strenuous effort. Paul worked hard to be what God wanted him to be and to do what God wanted him to do. His labor in Philippi had been difficult (Acts 16:11-40). It required hard work. If the Philippians would remain faithful to Great Commission ministry, the apostle would rest assured that his labor was not for nothing.

Verse 17

Verse 17 alluded to Paul’s trial in a Roman prison. As he awaited news regarding his trial and sentencing, he knew death was a real possibility (Philippians 1:22-24). In light of these things, and in light of his words concerning the Philippians’ commitment to share the gospel (Philippians 2:15-16), he said, “But even if I am poured out as a drink offering on the sacrificial service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you” (Philippians 2:17). Paul’s words revealed his deep dedication to the cause of Christ. Quite possibly he meant them as an encouragement to his readers. He hoped that the church would exhibit a level of gospel commitment similar to his own. In his letter to the Romans, Paul encouraged all believers to offer themselves as living offerings for Christ’s purposes: “Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship” (Romans 12:1).

In describing his commitment, Paul said was being “...poured out as a drink offering on the sacrificial service....” His language was used in the Septuagint and New Testament in regard to the ritualistic service of Old Testament priests (Deuteronomy 12:27; Luke 1:23).⁷ In the context of Paul’s discussion in our current verse, it figuratively portrayed his life as a sacrifice for the Lord. Just as Old Testament drink offerings were poured on the altar, Paul pictured his blood being spilled in martyrdom for the gospel.

According to Paul, he offered himself as a sacrifice for the purpose of “the faith” of others. The term “faith,” as used in the context of Philippians 2:17, referred to the practice of Christian living. It encompassed the spiritual growth and sanctification process that takes place in the life of a believer after salvation. Paul regarded himself as laying down his life as a sacrifice for the spiritual well being of the Philippians, and for the well being of many other believers and congregations. The apostle was willing to die for the spiritual advancement of others. He even found joy in such sacrifice. He said, “I am glad and rejoice with all of you.”

Verse 18

Both Scripture (2 Timothy 4:6) and church history indicate that Paul was eventually executed because of his preaching. For many, his death undoubtedly seemed like a needless waste.

⁷ Zodhiates, 746.

However, the apostle found joy in giving himself for the furtherance of Christ's kingdom. In addition, he urged other believers to see his sacrifice the way he saw it. He told the Philippians, "In the same way you should also be glad and rejoice with me" (Philippians 2:18). Joy was a persistent theme in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians 1:18; 2:17; 2:28; 3:1; 4:4, 10). It may have seemed strange that he called the church to rejoice because of his sufferings. However, such rejoicing was fitting, since Paul's trials were being used to advance the gospel (Philippians 1:12-14). In addition, Paul knew the teaching of Jesus. He was aware that his sufferings and death would be used to bring life for many. Didn't Jesus say, "Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself. But if it dies, it produces much fruit" (John 12:24).