

Matt Jones

APPL 619: Preaching and Worship

Sermon I

Philippians 1:12-20

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

May the Gospel be spoken here! Our passage for today comes directly after Paul has greeted the church at Philippi and prayed for their abounding love. Before we get into the passage, some background context might be helpful. This letter follows a fairly standard friendship letter and was probably written, at least in part, because the Philippians were dealing with opposition having to do with the “cult of the emperor” in which the emperor was to be nearly deified. This practice obviously caused concern within the church who proclaimed Jesus as the true Lord. Paul wanted to let them know they were not alone in their persecution, for he knows what they are going through. It is with this context that we approach our passage that is still part of the introductory section of Philippians.

Let us start walking through our verses for today. After his warm greeting is shared he goes directly into talking about his situation and discussing the gospel. Verse 12 gives us a clue as to Paul's situation, namely prison. But shockingly, the gospel has prospered even in this circumstance. His imprisonment, or literally chains or bonds, seems to be a good thing to Paul. While he was put there because of his work for Christ, his work for Christ, obviously, didn't end. In fact Paul seems to flourish in jail. Verse 13 and 14 tell us of two unintended repercussions of Paul's imprisonment (at least in the eyes of the Romans): firstly that Paul's mere presence there, along with a few words I imagine, allowed Christ to become known. And secondly, the imprisonment allowed the Christians there, probably because of the strength of Paul, to be empowered and encouraged to boldly speak the Word of Truth.

Here is where things get a little more interesting. The Message translation puts verse 15 a bit more starkly than the New American Standard does: [change tone / pause] "It's true that some here preach Christ because with me out of the way, they think they'll step right into the spotlight. But the others do it with the best heart in the world." [change tone / pause] It is hard for us to picture two of the things going on here: firstly that there were pastors in the first century that would act in such a way as to "preach for the spotlight" as it were. Secondly, that Paul, some 2000 years ago, could speak into what has become a "one-upmanship" within the church in our own time. I will come back to that later. Luckily Paul does go on to say that all is not lost: there are, indeed, those that preach out of good will. Paul knows the real reason for preaching Christ: verse 16 tells us that the appropriate motivation is love. Paul wants to encourage those that follow in his footsteps, not because he thinks he is so great, but because he is simply a follower of Jesus and a lover of the Gospel. But verse 17 shows that Paul is also not blind to the ease of getting caught up in something that is all too often human nature: selfishness. Even preaching is not out of reach of our selfishness and Paul wants to make sure that sin is kept in check. Their selfishness even goes so far that they, seeing Paul as a competitor, hope to cause him distress in prison.

But here is the amazing thing about the Truth of the Word that verse 18 through 20 share: regardless of the intent of the preacher, Christ is proclaimed! That, as it should, causes Paul to rejoice. Paul is delivered, saved even, and knows things will turn out as they were intended

because of the relationship he has formed with the Philippian church along side the Holy Spirit. By that same Spirit, Paul will not be ashamed in anything and will boldly live, or die, for Christ.

So what are we to glean from this? Is Paul simply putting on a nice face in a difficult situation? This letter to the Philippians is one of encouragement. As Paul seems to be on friendly terms with them, he wants them to know that he is ok, but also doesn't spend much time talking about himself and moves right into the Gospel. Paul doesn't want to just send a letter telling people to be happy in difficult situations, he wants to let them know that difficult situations are perfect times to let the Gospel speak, both to themselves and to others. Paul's concern, as it often is, is for the Gospel. Regardless of his situation, he knows he is called to boldly speak Truth.

Regardless of any persecution or ill will, the Gospel is spread. Even though the circumstances were not of his choosing, Paul not only makes do, but takes joy in them! The verses about the motives of the preachers are not his focus, but what are they surrounded by? In verse 14 – others have spoken the Word more courageously. In verse 18 – Christ is proclaimed and I will rejoice! This is the just of Paul's message here in the opening of this letter. Yes he wants them, and us, to know of his condition and the struggles he has faced, not in arrogance but because of the relationship he has formed with the Philippians and because it is a means to talk about the Gospel which is what he really wanted to discuss.

I would suggest that in this section Paul wants to make five things apparent to his Philippian friends. First, is that any circumstance he is in, by his own choosing, or in this case, not, he will spread the Word of God. Second, Paul is cleverly speaking to the political situation of their day. Third, Seeing Paul's strength can give courage to other believers. Fourth, regardless of others' intentions, the Gospel is proclaimed. And fifth, Paul knows that whatever may happen, Christ will be exalted.

Let's unpack these five assertions. First, Paul's main goal is to spread the Word of Christ. He had wanted to go to Rome to preach, instead he was thrown in jail, in Rome. Paul is not the type to look at the negative in a situation, he wanted to preach in Rome, well that is where he was, it didn't matter that he was in prison. The ability to use any situation as it comes is crucial for an evangelist. In our own ministry we often wait until we see the perfect situation because then we

know what to do, we know how to handle things. The problem with that is how long do we wait for the perfect ministry? Will the perfect opportunity ever come? Aren't we, at the same time, letting many other possible ministries and opportunities pass us by? Yes, we might be able to preach the Gospel in that perfect ministry, but here in verse 12 it seems that Paul says his current circumstances, as negative as they are, have turned out for the greater purpose of the Gospel. He wasn't talking about future circumstances, he wasn't talking about his perfect opportunity, he was talking about where he was right then. He used that moment to minister and to spread the Gospel. This point was particularly difficult for me in writing this sermon. I am to be preaching the Word of God to a group of my peers, which is no easy task, especially in seminary. I wanted the situation to be perfect, to make it as easy as possible. This past Sunday I had returned back to Vancouver after spending time down in Washington for my mother's birthday and had also just spent time with my community group so was feeling pretty good, this was a good situation. But then things changed. My laptop started acting strangely and crashed. Okay, no huge deal, I have things backed up in various locations, it is a setback, but something that I can deal with. After reinstalling everything and getting it up and running again I start recovering all my documents from backups. Much to my dismay, my Regent CD is the only one that, for some reason, is not readable. This further darkened my mood. Surely these were not fruitful circumstances to be writing a sermon or a book review or any other sort of scholarly pursuit! How sad that I was looking at a passage talking about negative circumstances and I could only complain and didn't even see the connection to what was going on around me. Through this circumstance of mine, is there greater progress for the Gospel? Well that remains to be seen. Although I must say that I have learned a lesson in this, so even if the Gospel isn't furthered for you, it was for me!

Second, this letter also speaks to the political situation of the day. The irony of Paul's situation is that while he is being persecuted for his devotion to Christ, Christ is still being proclaimed. Not only that but He is being proclaimed to the elite praetorian guard spoken of in verse 13. The praetorians were the best of the best, the emperor's elite troops in Rome. And Paul is able to share the Word with the whole guard. This is not a small statement to make. This would speak to the Philippians because, like many Roman cities, they were always under the watchful eye of the empire. Paul was in prison over a matter of *religio licita* which was the discussion of whether

or not Christians fell under the Jewish classification. Along with that debate, he, as well as other Christians in the Roman Empire, were also under threat of being called treasonous because they proclaimed Christ as Lord and not Caesar as the “cult of the emperor” required. It is in the context that Paul speaks the Word to the whole guard. This would serve as encouragement to the Philippians in two ways, if the praetorian’s can be preached to, anyone can and if Paul can speak truth in that persecution, they should be able to as well. Paul was looking the claims of treason in the face and preaching Truth into it. This passage is a political encouragement just as much as it is a Gospel encouragement.

Third, as verse 14 points out, other Christians seeing Paul’s example in prison have been given new courage to speak the Word. Paul would probably prefer to be able to freely evangelize himself, but he is also happy to see that others, taking cues from himself, have been given the ability to speak without fear. It seems there is no greater compliment to an evangelical to know that others can pick up where you left off and continue on in God’s work. And I am sure that nearly every person in here can say that at one point they have taken confidence in their own work because of the example of another.

Fourth, the Truth of the Gospel is still spoken regardless of the speaker’s intent. This is a hard one for me and yet, this isn’t even Paul’s biggest concern in this passage. This idea is hard for me to swallow because I want the Word to be spoken from pure heart (which is somewhat ironic because, knowing myself, I know that I am not exactly pure! Yet, here I am!) But verse 15 wisely informs us that even preachers are fallen. Some preach from envy and strife whereas others from good will. The notion that some pastors want to preach for the spotlight and outshine Paul seems absurd to us, but pastors today who want their own glory seem quite prevalent. It makes sense to see “one-upmanship” in sports, but in our churches? Pastors want congregations and when there are 5 churches within 5 minutes of their own church, they will often do whatever it takes to get people to come. Hopefully our instinct is to make sure the church is being true to the gospel and not allowing selfishness to persist. And while Paul would most likely agree with those inklings, here he says “in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.” This type of “one-upmanship” and selfishness makes me think of TBN, are you familiar with this? “The Bible Network” is a television station that shows a wide variety

of Christian programming from music videos, to talk shows to televangelists. I have always had a very negative view of this channel because it is always the Benny Hinn type televangelists who are always seeming to preach what people want to hear in order to get them to donate money, often being of the “health and wealth” type theology – conveniently they don’t tell you it is *their own* health and wealth you are helping. These are the type of preachers that I feel Paul is referring to as speaking from envy and strife – for their own good if you will – and yet he says the Gospel is preached. I found this difficult to understand until a good friend of mine illustrated this perfectly. His grandmother was not a Christian but would often watch TBN, for what reason, he was not sure. But because of the programs there she came to Belief in Christ. The Gospel was indeed preached through that sinful, at least in my eyes, channel! I may want to try and explain it in some other way, but Paul tells me not to. The fact that bad motivations won’t necessarily taint the message is the cause of Paul’s joy, the Truth trumps sin.

The fifth statement comes from verses 19 and 20. Gordon Fee offers this helpful and extended translation: [change tone / pause] “for I know that through your prayers and God’s supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ ‘this shall turn out [as with Job] to mean vindication for me,’ which will also be in keeping with my earnest expectation and hope, namely, that in no way will I be brought to shame, but rather that with all openness/boldness – as always so now – Christ will be magnified in my ‘body’, whether I am released or executed.” [change tone / pause] God will vindicate regardless of the outcome. The end of verse 20, along with the beginning of the next passage (the famous “to live is Christ and to die is gain”), make it seem like Paul is somewhat flippant about life and death, but this is far from the case. Paul merely has a proper understanding of what the true nature of life and death are. Whatever happens to him, the Gospel is spread and Christ is exalted. I think this goes against much of what the popular book, that I am sure many of you are familiar with, “The Purpose Driven Life” by Rick Warren says. Warren seems to conclude that there is a specific plan that God has for your life and you just have to discern what that is. Now, I have a Calvinist background and so have some notion of predestination (hopefully in the same sense that Paul does) and believe that God truly is sovereign and in complete control in every sense, but Warren seems to take things too far. Paul here doesn’t say “I now need to discern what God has lined up for me.” He says “for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance.” Salvation is another way deliverance can be translated.

Paul is not worried about figuring out every next step for deliverance, he has faith and trust that God, through the prayers of his friends in Philippi along with the Holy Spirit, is enough. Paul also doesn't negate his own desires. Often when we are trying to discern the will of God, and I am not saying we shouldn't by any means, we set aside our own desires and try to figure out what is the Godly thing to do. The "What would Jesus do?" mentality. Now, of course, that can definitely be a good thing to do because often our desires should be set aside. But here Paul does something different. He says "according to my earnest expectation and hope." Now that is interesting to me. The way I have been taught, Paul would have said "according to God's desire." I am still pretty sure that in many ways Paul would affirm that as well, for in talking to the Romans he says "I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you." In Romans, he clearly understands that his actions are controlled, to a degree, by what God wills. But in our verse, he doesn't negate God's will; he just affirms that our desires are still important and that God will listen to them. So it seems that for Paul our desires still matter but need to be kept in check by what we can discern from God through prayer and in the Scriptures.

This passage has quite a few different components in a very small space, but they all center around verse 18's "In every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice." It seems as though I keep saying the same things over and over, well I am. The Gospel being proclaimed was so important to Paul that this passage keeps coming back to that theme. Paul's circumstances spread the Gospel. The political situation can spread the Gospel. Paul's strength can encourage others to preach the Gospel in boldness. Regardless of intentions, the Gospel can be spread. And finally, whatever God has ahead for Paul, and us, Christ will be exalted and the Gospel will spread. So rejoice brothers and sisters and be strengthened and encouraged by the Truth of the Gospel and go fourth and preach it yourself!

Let us pray: Father God, we thank you that you sent your Son down in boldness that we me also be bold. I thank you for Paul and his devotion and strength to Your Gospel. I thank you for your empowering presence in the Holy Spirit. You will supply all our needs according to Your riches in glory in Christ Jesus. And now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen.