

The Furtherance of the Gospel

Philippians 1:12-18

Boris Kornfield was a Russian Jew and a medical doctor. He was imprisoned at a Russian concentration camp in the early 1950s for a political crime under the reign of Joseph Stalin, and while in prison he became a Christian. As a doctor, his living conditions were better than most prisoners, for the prison depended upon him to continue practicing medicine! One of his responsibilities, as a doctor and a prisoner, was to sign medical decrees that would essentially condemn prisoners to a solitary confinement cell block of punishment that was so inhumane that it could be called a torture chamber. Few emerged alive from it. Out of conscience Dr. Kornfield eventually refused to sign those authorizations. He then turned in one of the orderlies for stealing the patient's food, an action which could very well incite other orderlies to murder him.

Dr. Kornfield lived knowing that his life was in danger, and he began to tell others of the freedom of his new-found Christian faith. He shared his testimony with one young man who had just been operated on for cancer of the intestines, and despite the pain of his surgery and the effects of anesthesia, the man listened, all afternoon and late into the night. When that patient awoke the next morning, Dr. Kornfield was dead. He had been brutally murdered. But his testimony never died. That young man he spoke to about Christ became a Christian as a result, and survived that prison camp. He went on to tell the world what he had learned there at that gulag. That patient's name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a man renowned for his profound testimony of faith in Jesus Christ.

Bad circumstances were no hindrance to the gospel. And, in fact, God uses those bad circumstances as the means by which

the gospel advanced! That's what we have here in our text tonight. Bad circumstances. Paul is in prison, in chains as he says in verse 7. But his testimony is clear,

v.12

In order to fully understand these words, imagine yourself to be a member of this Philippian church. Paul was with you, in person, some four years ago. But what happened to him? What happened to him after he went to Rome? Was he alive or dead? You have heard rumors, but you don't know. You are worried. Had Paul come to trial? Had he already been put to death? What has happened? And then finally, you get a letter. Paul is still alive, but chained to a Roman prison guard, waiting for the verdict of life or death from the emperor.

This letter has amazing news. It's not a call to pray for his release, but a marvelous testimony that even in the midst of bad circumstances, and even amidst people with bad motives, God is advancing the gospel. And for Paul, the prisoner, that's all that matters.

v.12

Paul's message to this church is so obvious. And yet, that situation isn't new. The very first missionary to the Gentile nations was also persecuted and, ultimately, put to death. Yet in all of that, the gospel advanced. That's Paul's testimony. That's what he writes to the Philippians. He was imprisoned when he wrote this letter, but that was no hindrance to the gospel! That was no obstacle. Thus he declares,

v.13

Those weren't mere words. He wasn't speaking in platitudes, though that might seem to be the case for us. The words might seem cheap and easy, but they were the deepest reality of the experience of Paul's life, "my chains are in Christ."

There is a fuller expression of the same idea in,

2 Tim. 2:8 “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.”

Such a bold and clear proclamation. “The word of God is not bound!” He continues,

2 Tim. 2:11 “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 12 if we endure, we will also reign with him.”

So it is that,

I. THE GOSPEL CAN ADVANCE DESPITE WORLDLY OPPOSITION.

And it does! By Jesus’ own promise,

Mat. 16:18 “...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Thus, in our text this evening, we read this,
v.12

An advance! A furtherance. Progress. A profit. The gospel profits! And Paul remains in prison.

v.13-14

The truth is that,

A. The gospel may spread even in the midst of persecution.

The gospel. The good news. It is a message, that Jesus Christ lived as a man, and died to pay the penalty and the punishment for your sins. The gospel is the message of life, how

you gain eternal life, how you receive the forgiveness of your sins. And it is a gift. The gospel is not about what you earn by your good works. It is about the gift that God gives to those who believe in Jesus and trust in Jesus.

And that simple message has changed the world. And it spreads even when there is opposition. Sometimes, that spread of the gospel is hard to measure. Sometimes, the external evidence and data might prove otherwise. Sometimes, for some seasons of time, it simply may not be true. But in the biggest sense of the picture, in the biggest sense of the picture of God’s providence, the gospel continues to advance. And that is why Jesus has not yet returned!

Thus the praise of the Psalmist in,

Ps.72:8 “May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! 9 May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! 11 May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him.”

From sea to sea, an expression representing the whole of the earth. From the River to the ends of the earth! All nations will serve him!. That’s the hope and the goal of the gospel. And it is true even in the midst of persecution. Paul writes to the Corinthians,

2 Cor. 4:1 “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart...5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus 'sake. 6 For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

But there would be trouble!

2 Cor. 4:7 “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you...16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

That continues to be our hope as well, our hope in the gospel. Afflicted...but not crushed. “Perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” For Paul that meant imprisonment; but in his imprisonment, that even those in the imperial guard would hear the gospel. His imprisonment meant that the gospel would be spread in Rome. God caused the gospel to advance.

So don't be fooled by the appearance of our own outward circumstances. Don't be discouraged, either, for God is working in the midst of all circumstances. God is working all things together for good, in the way he determines to be good. Even in the context of worldly opposition. Even in the context of persecution. Even in the context of the world as it exists today, even the strange world in which we live today, a world in which the things of the Lord and any semblance of biblical wisdom seem to be gone entirely.

Something else happens in that same context.

B. Those proclaiming the gospel in the midst of persecution may gain confidence and boldness.

Persecution does many things, and that includes identifying the weak and fearful. Persecution will silence some, even many, who might otherwise proclaim the gospel. For some, it might magnify their fears and insecurities, and cause them to shrink from their duty.

But others, others are emboldened! Persecution makes others to be strong and courageous. Opposition gives some people courage, a courage that is stimulated by the danger of the opposition. God's grace is sufficient, and God's grace is given in response to the needs of his people, at their time of need.

Paul expresses it this way,
v.14

Courage is often the unintended outcome of persecution. Rather than causing the faithful to cower in fear, opposition makes them strong. Persecution makes them bold! That's how God works, isn't it? Paul realizes that because of his circumstances, others have gained more courage, more boldness to speak the word without fear. That's what bad circumstances do.

Even on a human level, on a natural level, bad circumstances often bring out the best in people. Natural disasters often stimulate reactions of neighborly interest and concern that go unexpressed any other time. Shared troubles build bonds between people, and the experience of trouble can stir others to do what's right. How much more in the work of the gospel!

Confidence and boldness. That's what Paul's Roman imprisonment brought about!

Then, something that may seem even more unlikely. Even more surprising, maybe even troubling.

II. THE GOSPEL CAN ADVANCE DESPITE THE BAD MOTIVES OF MEN.

Paul is very honest about some of the other preachers of the gospel. He evaluates and judges them in what seems to be a very harsh manner.

v.15

Some, surely, have a good will. Good intentions. Good motives. After all, they are proclaiming the truth about Jesus. Still, amazingly, "some indeed preach Christ from envy and strife." Those words are accurately translated. Envy is always such an ugly thing. Resentment toward others. Jealousy. Discontentment unto covetousness. Wanting what others enjoy. Striving to gain what others possess. In order to surpass them!

Closely related, of course, to rivalry. Contentiousness. It's a competition, a battle, a contest. With a winner to be declared. And some are preaching the gospel in that way, wanting to exalt themselves and to promote their own honor and importance.

Sadly, that motivation is frequently observed today, as well. I don't see the need to give specific examples. But fallen men, even ministers of the gospel, are prone to such bad motives, evil motives. Yet even that doesn't stop the gospel.

A. Envy and strife will not destroy the advance of the gospel.

It might not seem like that to us. Rivalry and competition might seem harmful, and the immediate effect might well be so.

Such personal conflicts often seem to cause great trouble. But "no," says Paul. The gospel is so powerful that it can even overcome the sinful and evil motives of men as they proclaim that gospel.

Similarly,

B. Selfish ambition will not destroy the advance of the gospel.

v.16-17

Now I'm not defending selfish ambition! In fact, it is consistently identified as the very opposite of a godly motive. And Jesus himself is presented as the primary example,

Phil.2:3 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Everything about Jesus was the opposite of selfish ambition. He was a servant, who humbled himself. Unto death! So the calling of a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is the call of humility, counting "others more significant than yourselves." Everything about Jesus is a demonstration of love, love being defined as the very opposite of selfish ambition. But even so, God uses imperfect, sinful creatures to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. And even their sinfulness, even the presence of sin as obvious as this sin of selfish ambition, even then, the gospel will advance!

Because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. The gospel does not depend upon the wisdom or the eloquence of a man, but rather upon the working of the power of God. Paul goes out of his way to say this,

1 Cor. 2:1 “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

Your faith has to rest in the power of God! And in that context, even the selfish ambition of men will not destroy the advance of the gospel. Nor, more generally, a failure of love.

C. A failure of love will not destroy the advance of the gospel.

Thankfully, there are those who preach the gospel with the motive of love. And Paul recognizes that. But not everyone.

v.16-17

For Paul, the lack of love gets very, very personal. These people were glad to see him imprisoned! They were willing to cause him affliction, to cause him harm in his imprisonment. They were willing to see his demise, if it would serve to advance themselves, exposing their insincerity as clear as clear can possibly be.

But,

III. WHAT THEN?

Here’s the point of this whole sermon. What then? What does Paul do? Go on the counter offensive? Plot your strategy

of self-protection and self-preservation? Get defensive, and go after those insincere and envious rivals who are so absent of the basic experience of love that they seem to delight in Paul’s imprisonment? Retaliate? Circle the wagons? Plan the battle?

What then?

v.18

This is especially hard for people who always think in terms of black and white. How can Paul say this about people so clearly sinful in their motive? Why doesn’t he condemn them? Why doesn’t he correct their error? Why doesn’t he promote the right and proper motive for the ministry of gospel?

I certainly can’t answer those questions infallibly, but I can certainly say this, that,

A. What matters is that Christ is proclaimed.

v.18

Amazing, that he overlooks the motive. “Whether in pretense or in truth.” Whether for show, in bad motive, for rivalry selfish ambition, or for sincere and truthful motives. It doesn’t matter to Paul! Paul doesn’t concern himself with the criticism which we can say would have well deserved. And the reason is that there is something more important. Something more critical. Something more necessary. “That Christ is proclaimed.”

At other times, when the gospel itself is at stake, Paul seems to be much more harsh, doesn’t he? When the gospel is at stake, rather than his own safety and freedom, he reacts much more strenuously.

Gal. 1:6 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a

different gospel— 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”

So the defense of the gospel requires earnest engagement! As we read in Jude, we are “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” That’s the language of battle. But when it comes to self-defense, Paul’s response is very different. “What then?” What matters, even in the context of those who seek to afflict Paul in his imprisonment? What then? “Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.”

We can all learn from that sort of an attitude, can’t we? It is easy to be critical of others. It is easy to find fault. It is easy to emphasize distinctives and distinctions. And in the right context, that emphasis is good. In the best context, that is the strength of our denomination, the strength of what we call the reformed faith. We make a lot of distinctions. A lot of judgments and careful decisions. All in the desire to please God, to honor God. It is good to be orderly, it is good to be consistent, and faithful. And it is good to operate with good motives. God designed the church to operate that way, giving us instructions and directions which we are called upon to observe.

But still, beloved, still there is a higher priority that marks Paul’s comments here. He is imprisoned, for the sake of the gospel. And there are fellow preachers of the gospel whose motives are impure, who lack love. They even seek to afflict Paul himself! And he is willing to say that it doesn’t matter!

v.18 “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached.”

Sometimes it is a matter of church politics. Sometimes it is a matter of human pride, and selfish rivalry. Envy. For Paul, the priority is obvious! The goal is obvious. The advance of the gospel is what matters!

Now, think of how that applies to yourself. And to your own attitude. Is that what matters most to you?

Again, let me emphasize, this is not an excuse for careless theology or incorrect doctrine. But it does refer to your attitude, and to mine. God prospers some churches in ways I can’t understand. There are preachers about whom I could offer a variety of criticisms, doctrinal and practical. And yet God uses them. And at the end of the day, that is what matters to Paul.

That’s not always easy, not when you find yourself holding deep convictions. As I do. I hold deep convictions about many issues, and I strive to form those convictions based upon Scripture. And I can’t just ignore those convictions. I don’t wish to associate for combined worship with groups who practice elements of worship that I believe the Bible determines to be unacceptable. I don’t wish to unite with other denominations in a broadly ecumenical or even broadly evangelical fashion, where there are serious issues of doctrine involved. I am very concerned as a shepherd to protect you from bad doctrine.

But what about when God uses some of those groups for the advancement of the gospel? Then we ought to sing his praise, and rejoice when the preaching of the gospel is furthered!

B. We can rejoice when Christ is proclaimed.

Paul rejoices! He rejoices in his own imprisonment, in his own trials, because Jesus Christ is still being proclaimed. The gospel is being proclaimed, and for that, no matter what the implications might be for himself, he rejoices.

v.18

That's a challenge for us. A challenge to preserve this priority ourselves, and this joy, that Jesus Christ would be proclaimed. No envy. No rivalry. No selfish ambition.

What matters is Jesus! What matters is the gospel of Jesus. What matters is this gospel, that,

Rom. 10:9 "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

So I proclaim that gospel to you. Confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord. Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead for your justification, that your sins might be forgiven. And you will be saved.

The proclamation of that message is to be the source of our greatest joy.