

Philippians

Part 5 – So Long as Christ is Preached

Philippians 4:15-18

After encouraging the Philippians with the news of how his imprisonment has served to advance the gospel Paul acknowledges a sad reality that among those who are now speaking up boldly for the gospel: “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry...” (vs. 15). They were envious of Paul’s status as an apostle and the influence his ministry had achieved among the churches. Their assumption was that Paul’s motives were similarly selfish. Thus they believed that their boldness in proclaiming Christ would cause Paul distress in prison (vs. 17).



But they miscalculated the heart of the apostle. Not only was Paul not envious of their freedom to proclaim Christ, he reveled in it. So long as Christ was being proclaimed Paul had reason to rejoice.

Of course this is not to suggest that motives do not matter. Indeed, they do. Imagine the heart that seeks to harm a fellow Christian *while preaching the gospel*! But for Paul this was a question of priorities. If pressed, he would choose a scoundrel who rightly proclaimed the gospel over a decent fellow who corrupted it. As he warned the Galatians: “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” (Gal 1:8).

What gave Paul such freedom from the sort of envy that lived in the hearts of his rivals? What was the secret to his ability to rejoice over the success of those who sought to do him harm? The answer surfaces repeatedly throughout the letter to the Philippian church. Paul was a Christ-saturated man. Jesus is his constant theme. He cannot comment on any subject, consider any challenge, or reflect on any suffering without turning to Christ. “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (vs. 21).

Main Idea: The most essential activity of the church is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Vs. 15 – “Some” refers back to those Paul mentions as having become “much more bold” (vs. 14). Therefore, it appears that the “brothers in the Lord” mentioned in the previous verse include both the rightly motivated and the wrongly motivated preachers of the gospel. Given that the later were members of the visible church Paul proceeded with the assumption that they were brothers. They were envious of Paul’s status and influence. They probably saw his imprisonment as evidence of failure on his part.

Vs. 16 – The well-motivated brothers recognized that Paul’s imprisonment was not a sign of failure but of faithfulness. Therefore they were motivated by love recognizing that Paul was divinely commissioned and his chains were evidence of his faithfulness.

Vs. 17 – Paul raises no question as to the integrity of the message itself. These men were preaching Christ. The genuinely motivated among them see Paul’s imprisonment as a demonstration of his loyalty to Christ and his faithfulness to his calling and, therefore, as a consequence of the work the Lord called his apostle to perform. The other group, being motivated by rivalry expected Paul to have the same motivation in his own preaching. Therefore they assumed that their preaching would fill Paul with envy and thus increase his suffering in prison.

Vs. 18a – “What then?” – Paul’s way of saying “so what?” For Paul this is a matter of priorities. He is in no position to discipline these brothers for poor motives. What he can do however is judge their message. And surprisingly perhaps, these poorly motivated brothers were getting the gospel right. And in this Paul had sufficient reason to rejoice.

1. The Strength of Envy

Vs. 15a – “Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry...”

Vs. 17 – “The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.”

- One of the blessings Paul points to connected to his imprisonment is that many of the brothers in Rome had become “much more bold” to preach Christ (vs. 14). But among those brothers were some who preached Christ out of “envy and rivalry.” It seems incongruous to preach Christ with such poor motives. Apparently there were men within the Roman church who envied Paul’s status and influence. They likely saw his imprisonment as evidence of Paul’s weakness perhaps even pointing to his suffering to cast doubt on his apostleship.
- With Paul sidelined, these ambitious preachers sought to fill the void by eclipsing Paul’s previous success. In doing so they sought to take Paul’s place as the preeminent leader among the Christians of Rome. They also assumed that their success would increase Paul’s suffering in prison.
- Envy is a powerful sin. It is closely related to coveting which is prohibited in the 10th commandment. Envy is resentment over the success or possessions of another. In the case of these men in Rome, they envied Paul’s status and success. The strength of envy is illustrated in the fact that Paul’s rivals in Rome were almost certainly blinded by the fact that it was their chief motive in proclaiming Christ.

2. The Priority of the Gospel

Vs. 18 – “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

- Paul’s attitude toward his rivals is surprising. They supposed that his feelings of envy were at least as strong as theirs. But they underestimated God’s grace in Paul’s life. The former self-righteous Pharisee was now a man who could rejoice in the success of those who sought to harm him. What freed Paul to have such an attitude was his sense of priorities. It is a surprising fact that these unfaithful brothers were actually proclaiming Christ well. And since Paul was in no place to correct them for poor motives he was at least able to rejoice that the gospel was going forth from them.
- We must not conclude from Paul’s attitude that motives are unimportant. Rather, it is a matter of priorities. If pressed, Paul would choose a poorly motivated brother who gets the gospel right over a loving brother who communicates a distorted gospel.

3. The Source of Joy

Vs. 18b – “...and in that I rejoice.”

- Paul’s attitude was not the result of a misplaced stoicism. The source of his joy in the midst of his many adversities was Jesus. Specifically, Paul’s joy was deeply rooted in the Jesus who though in very nature God took on flesh and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross in the place of sinners and was then raised to life and exalted above all things (2:5-11).
- Paul expects his brothers and sisters in Philippi to “catch” his joy in Jesus so that they too will be able to rejoice in every situation that the gospel is made known.