

Philippians 1:27-30 12-10-17
Outrejoice Them

If you could pick the topic for a Sunday sermon, what would it be? Recently, I asked a group of church leaders to supply a list of things they would like to hear a sermon about. One of the responses encouraged me to address the challenge believers face in dealing with close family members, maybe co-workers as well, who are hostile to our faith, who are openly oppositional on issues that tend to divide us along worldview lines. Maybe you are there with your family, ready to have Christmas dinner and your aunt from Jersey starts berating those stupid sexually-repressed hypocritical Christians who insist on telling everybody how to live, who want to deprive women of the right over their own bodies and try to impose their own flat-earth nonsense on the rest of us. Ever been there? Or somewhere like it? Last year at this time, we were hearing about all the family strife caused by the refusal of some to eat a holiday meal with people who voted for Trump. Apparently, there are a lot of those people, and they had some empty seats at the family table. Disagreements like that can disrupt family harmony for sure. For us as Christians we see the challenges increasing for us. The world in which we live is not drifting so much as plummeting rapidly away from Biblical values, standards, and precepts. Some Christians simply cave in and conclude that the Bible and the church was really wrong all those years about homosexuality and gender. Some run for cover in some way. You may have followed the hubbub over the appearance on the TV show, *The View*, of the mega-church pastor from Hillsong Church in New York, Carl Lentz. When asked if abortion is sinful he didn't say *yes* or *no*. Those answers are so old-school anyway. Instead he said, "God's the judge" and "People have to live to their own convictions." What? People have to live to their own convictions. Let's not dare suggest that we have a relevant word from God on any of these matters. I feel for Pastor Lentz. It is harder than ever, in my lifetime, to be loyal to Jesus and popular on *The View*.

So, let's see if we can glean some wisdom, some perspective from Scripture on how to conduct ourselves in an increasingly oppositional world. The New Testament was not written in Akron Ohio in the 1950's. It was written in a context of tremendous hostility to the Christian message and so it has much to so to us in our predicaments. Philippians 1: **27-30** *Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; 28 in no way alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for*

them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. 29 For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, 30 experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

We see in verse 27 that we are to not only believe the gospel, we are also to behave the gospel. That is, we are to conduct ourselves in a worthy manner that fits our profession of faith in a gospel of truth, and reconciliation, and salvation. Now, it is important as you read this particular epistle, to remember that it is written in the context of suffering and trial. The author was locked up, under arrest in Rome. The recipients were experiencing hardship and persecution. So, the apostle relates his exhortation in verse 27 to this problem which he discusses in 28-30. The problem of opposition faced by Christians. From this passage and others in the New Testament we discover some important life principles.

First we learn to expect opposition. Verses 27 and 28 say to stand firm and strive *in no way alarmed by your opponents*. Biblically informed Christian will not be surprised by opposition. I John 3:**13** *Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.* Jesus Himself told us this. He said *the world hates me and so will hate my followers*. Far from promising us a rose garden and a corridor of smiling faces, the Bible reports and predicts continual conflict and enmity between the light and the darkness. The apostle Paul experienced as much persecution as anyone. But Paul had a tremendous advantage. He knew persecution was coming. No surprise to him. Look back at Acts 20:**22-23** *behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.* Paul knew that wherever he went as a missionary he would be opposed. He knew what was coming and that is a tremendous advantage. John 15:**18-21** *If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21 "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.* "If they persecute Me, they will persecute you." Did they persecute Jesus? He was persecuted to death.

Is some measure of opposition coming your way? It most surely is. Atheists, the transgendered, Muslims – all are protected groups, whose free-speech rights are insured, whose dignity must be protected. But it is open season on Christians. Christians can be ridiculed, restricted

and maligned in the most vicious fashion with impunity. That's America 2017. In other parts of the world, even in Canada, the situation for Christians is much worse. There are plenty of legal messes we can get into when we refuse to bake cakes for certain weddings or establish behavioral policies for our company. That kind of thing. There is the opposition of being refused jobs when it is learned that we are one of those born-again types. But then there is the simple relational tension like I described before. We endure the opposition of the sneering lip or the open put-down of our values and views. When it happens we are not to be surprised. We were warned, right? Yes, but we still have to make a decision about how to respond.

Consider the possibility of offering no response at all. Or no response except a silent prayer. Many times hostile people say things just to get under our skin, just to get a response. Disappoint them. You don't have to answer every charge. You don't have to correct every false claim. There is no rule for what is right in every situation, but sometimes silence is a great choice. It does not suggest that you agree. It does not mean you are a wimp. It could simply mean that you are not alarmed and so can hold your peace. So many times it seems to me that people do outrageous things to get attention and we give it to them, when it is better to ignore. The NFL players kneeling during the anthem for example. What would have happened if no one had made a fuss? As parents Beth and I often found this approach to work pretty well at times. No response to attention-getting bad behaviors is sometimes a really good thing.

When you deem a response to be better than a non-response, well it is good to insure that it is offered with gentleness, with respect, with a sense of calm, and, if you can muster it without sarcasm, even a sense of humor. Because we expected opposition, because Jesus told us it would happen, because the approval of Jesus is enough for us, we are not alarmed, we stay cool and communicate the truth in love.

Well, the second thing we learn from reading the New Testament about opposition is to prepare for insults. As we have read, we are forewarned and we can prepare. We can walk into those family gatherings or the office party emotionally ready for what the crude brother or the obnoxious colleague will offer. We can remind our hearts that the one who is for us is greater than any against us. We can sing and pray to steady our nerves. We can live in love and not in fear around people who differ with us and oppose our Lord. Now, in saying that, I am not suggesting that there is no cause for fear. People can hurt us. We aren't immune to that. We can suffer financially as a result of opposition. The exhortation of Scripture to *fear not* isn't grounded in the notion that we can't be hurt. It is grounded in the promise of Christ to be with us when we suffer and to reward us in His

way and his time. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:**31** *If God is for us, who is against us?* The answer to that is not, “no one” but it is, “no one of any consequence.” And so, because God is bigger, greater, stronger, better than anyone and everyone this world provides, we are called to fear Him and no one else. We are called to be loyal to Him whether that pleases or upsets our authorities or our children, or our grandparents.

Look again at our text **29-30** *For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, 30 experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.* We spoke in October about the idea that faith in Jesus is a gift from God, but for the Philippians the gift of faith brought it's not so popular sidekick Mr. Suffering. But this verse says that suffering is also a gracious gift of God. As a gift there is no need to try to get it. We certainly don't try to offend. In fact, we go out of our way not to. But our pursuit of godliness and our insistence on truth and justice will offend and will result in opposition, which Paul calls here a gift of God. That sounds strange to say but there are many ways in which suffering is a gift. We know God makes us pure through suffering. James 1:**2-3** *Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.* We are also told that earthly suffering, especially persecution for Christ's sake leads to heavenly rewards. Matthew 5:**11-12** *Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great.* But there is one other thing Paul relates it to in our passage. In verse 28 he says that persecution is a *sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you.* Now, what I believe he is getting at is that the persecution proves the guilt and lost nature of the persecutor, but reveals the genuine righteousness of the *persecutee*. When you see someone violently opposing Christians you know that person is in a sad, pitiful shape. I remember, in the movie, *The Hiding Place*, about the Dutch family that protected Jews during the holocaust, there was a scene in which Papa Ten-Boom shook his head in sorrow for German soldiers who were carrying off some Jews. And he said, “Ah, they have touched the apple of God's eye, what will become of them?” You catch that? Not, *what will become of us*, but *what will become of these who dare persecute the Lord's favorites*. If you are a child of God by faith, you are precious to Him. Those most to be pitied are those who oppose the children of God.

On a positive note, persecution also serves the Christian as a test which proves his or her genuine character. How you respond to it is very revealing, and the real thing, like real gold will pass the test. Think of Jesus when He was crucified. A Roman soldier beneath the cross watched His behavior, heard his words and, having seen how Jesus handled persecution said, *Truly this man was*

the Son of God. Persecution is a test, but for the true believer it is a gift because it demonstrates to him and to others that his faith is real. And to have a faith that is tested and proven is a tremendous thing - to know that my belief is more than a pleasant feeling, but something that will pass through the fire. I Peter 1:6-7 *In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, 7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* The proof of faith is exceeding precious, and it comes through opposition, through suffering. That is how the Lord can say that to the Philippians that their difficulties were a gift to them from God. No need to fear them. No need to fear those who would oppose us for our faith, because the Lord's purposes stand, and they work for us even through the evil intentions of others. So – prepare for insults and ask God to help you react with loyalty toward Christ, not fear of His enemies.

A third suggestion flowing from our text that applies to how we respond to those who oppose us is to learn to major on the majors. Major on the majors. What I mean by that is not to make a big deal over what TV shows your unbelieving family watches, or over how they choose to identify sexually, or over what politicians they support. Those things may matter to some extent, but they are all just symptoms of a choice made at the very core of their existence to oppose God, to refuse to heed His word, to rebel against His authority. If someone thinks the Bible is a lie, that Jesus is a fraud, and the supernatural a myth, why would we be surprised or concerned about their views on the LGBT agenda? The problem with our society's sexual orientation is that it is contra-God. Whether someone likes men, women, children or wildebeests is not nearly as important as whether they are submitting their lives to the King. Our denomination is now full of churches that left the mainline Presbyterian body in the last few years because that denomination started supporting homosexual conduct by pastors. But this church, North Park, left the mainline denomination 35 years ago because it was plainly evident then the PCUSA had no interest in submitting to the authority of Christ in its ruling and principles. My point? What matters is how one is oriented to the lordship of Jesus as expressed in His word. Views on abortion, marriage, sexual behavior, drugs, some political options, all of those are secondary to the issue of who is King? All of these celebrities and political figures who have been outed as sexual deviants in the last few months – why on earth would anyone be surprised? Our culture puts forth a world-view that excludes God, that excludes the spiritual, that suggests we have a few meaningless years to live before we fade into oblivion, what's to stop someone from trying to use their measly power to get a few thrills before it's all over? And

on what ground are we to say they are wrong? The book of Judges has this common theme in the early part of it. Repeatedly it says, “In those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” No king means no commonly recognized law. No authority to define morality. That’s what our culture teaches our children. Sometimes even the church, *Live to your own convictions. Wow! Follow your heart.* I think that is what Matt Lauer and Al Franken and Harvey Weinstein have been doing. What’s wrong with that? I can’t think of a thing – unless, unless, there actually is a King, a good King who has given us a law, a good law. And then the core problem is the cosmic rebellion by which we say of Jesus, *We will not have this man rule over us!* So, what matters supremely is not your view on genders, not your view on politics, not your view on marriage, not your view on music, tattoos, marijuana, or organic produce – what matters is how you relate to Jesus. Is He your Lord? Is He your Savior? That is the major thing – everything else, everything else falls under that.

Now to our fourth and final lesson for today from Philippians 1. Let’s learn from the gospel to outrejoice them. By “them” I mean those who oppose us. Sometimes we may argue, sometimes not. But always we who love Jesus can outrejoice our adversaries. Some of us want to outvote them. And that’s fine. Some of us want to outsmart them. And that’s cool. But more important and, what is always applicable, is that we can outrejoice them. Do you like that? Say it with me. *Outrejoice them.* That is the message I am trying to send myself when I encounter hostile reactions in the church or outside the church. It is sort of a holy funnel for my competitive personality. Maybe it will work for you too. Philippians 1:27 *Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.* That word “worthy” means, “fitting” and what is more fitting for a person saved by grace, adopted into God’s family and promised glory than to be joyful? This has been the legacy of believers from the beginning of the church. Even when persecuted, there was joy and it made the world sit up and take notice. *What is going on with you people? Why the calm? Why the contentment? How do you manifest this deep well of satisfaction? What do you know that we don’t?* Well, we know Jesus and He is with us in the good times and the bad. He makes us rich and safe. He gives us purpose and wisdom. He comforts our hearts and frees us to serve, to love, to forgive.

Outrejoice them! Part of that involves living a lifestyle that displays a healthy, difference from that of most people in the world. I hope I can convey this story properly. Over Thanksgiving, Beth and I visited some friends, who are connected to a private boarding school. Their daughter worked there. Their son was a student and basketball player there. It is a school with many minority students. Our friends told us that at this school they are known as the “perfect white family.” They

explained that because their marriage is intact, their kids are together, they all love and support each other, they are viewed as freaks by the students who generally come from backgrounds of enormous family dysfunction, where adultery is normal, divorce is rampant and substance abuse is routine. Our friends – the perfect white family. They know they are far from perfect, but in this world they do shine as lights. Now, that example is not about race obviously. It is somewhat about culture, but in our friends' case it is also about Jesus. My friend, Gary, who used to be my basketball buddy, who used to coach, can no longer do that because he has a severe case of Parkinson's. Younger than me but can't work anymore. But, thank God, he shines with a joy that flows from a very deep place in his soul. And he and his family shine the light of Christ. Gary used to outrebound, outshoot and outhustle his opponents, but now he simply outrejoices them. That is not only all he can do, it is more important than anything else he could do.

So, as you relate to those who oppose your Jesus, who mock your faith, who spread lies, keep your cool, stay loyal to Jesus, major on the majors and then lovingly outrejoice them to the glory of God and to their eternal puzzlement. By this we may conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, the good news of a Savior who loves us, died for us, rose again, reigns on high and will come again to make us His forever.