Philippians 2:16  3-10-19

*Holding Fast, Holding Forth*

The epistle of the apostle to the church at Philippi. Just two days after the Super Bowl Beth and I flew into Atlanta which hosted the big game. I was on the lookout to see if any big-time NFL players would be wondering through the airport. I saw no one. But the experience reminded me of the Super Bowl twenty-five years ago in Atlanta. It was a Cowboys and Bills game and my mother won tickets and a trip for four to the game. For four now, so she went with her husband and invited her favorite grandson to come along with the parent of his choice. Now, the trip included airfare, rental car and two nights in the Radisson, with four tickets to the game. But none of us ever made it to the game. There were literally thousands of reasons why we missed the game, but still we had a great time for two days star watching. We were right in the midst of the excitement in the main Super Bowl hotels and we saw all kinds of stars, and people we thought might have been stars. We rode the elevator with Marcus Allen, and saw Don Shula in the hotel lobby. It was truly a star-studded weekend. Well today it is my privilege to rub shoulders with stars of a different variety. We started down this road two weeks back when we learned that spiritual stars do not grumble, but gladly serve their Master. How did you do with that one? Huh? Hopefully our gladness rating went way up in the last two weeks. This morning we continue down the road to spiritual stardom, as we discuss keys to stardom part two. You recall that last time we saw how Paul holds forth in verse 14 the first key to stardom which is **14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing.** The second key to stardom is found in verse **16a holding fast the word of life.** Let’s read it all together **14-16 Do all things without grumbling or disputing so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights (or stars) in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.** I have read, as is my custom, from the New American Standard version. If you are following along in your King James Bible or your NIV, you will have different wording. Mine says *holding fast the word of life.* Yours will say *holding forth or holding out the word.* And the reason for this difference is the ambiguity of the rare Greek word used in verse 16. Does it mean *holding fast* like a child with a favorite toy or does it mean *holding it out* as one would a gift being offered? Bible commentators and Greek scholars are split over the meaning of the word because it seems to have both meanings. It is a rich Greek term that is translated properly in either version, but is translated comprehensively
in neither. For the picture painted by this word is not one of simple clutching as one would a
football, or of holding out as one would a cracker for a parrot. It is that of holding a torch. When you
hold a torch you hold it tightly – it is too important to drop - but you don’t hold it in like this either.
You hold it fast and you hold it out. And that is just what you are to do with the word of life. Keys to
stardom two and three are hold fast and hold forth the word of life.

But before I go on to comment on these two activities of the spiritual star, let’s think for a bit
on what it is that you are to hold fast and forth. It is the word of life. This expression refers, no
doubt, to the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul preached. The word of life is the
Bible and the doctrines taught therein. But consider for a bit why they would be called the word of
life. Ponder three reasons.

First, the gospel message of Christianity is a message about the way to life. It is a message
addressed to dead and dying men pointing them to the springs of life. It is a message about quality of
life for Jesus has said, I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly. The word
of life tells of a way of life which is so vibrant that compared to it, the life of unbelief is, well, like a
death. The plea of the Christian preacher therefore is basically this: Get a life! With testimony that
real life is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The word of life is also a message about duration of life, for again the gospel comes saying
God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believe in Him will not
perish but have eternal life. And in II Timothy 1:10 we read of our Savior Christ Jesus, who
abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. How important is this
word of life about the way of life? Could anything be more vital? Listen to what Moses said way
back in Deuteronomy 32:46-47 Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today,
which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. 47 For it is
not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. It is your life, and your relationship to this word
determines the quality and the duration of your life. So, if I preach it with earnestness or if I devote
my life to get out this message, you will understand why. It is the word of life!

Secondly, the gospel is also properly called the word of life because it is a message about the
Word of life who is Jesus Christ. It is especially true of the writings of the apostle John that Jesus
Himself is called the Word and the Life. John 1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was
with God, and the Word was God. John1:4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. And
I John 1:1-2 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—2 and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us. What is He talking about? The Word, the Life and the Word of Life all refer to Jesus who said of Himself in John 14:6 I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. To be plugged into Jesus is to have life. To be unattached is to be dead. And the Christian gospel is not about religion, it is not about church, it is about a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the answer. He is the Life, and the gospel about Jesus is therefore, the word of life.

Thirdly, the gospel is properly called the word of life because it centers around the news of the resurrection, the coming back to life of Jesus Christ. On the third day in the tomb Jesus was made alive. And that is the gospel. It tells of how God’s power brought new life to Jesus and how by God’s power you also can rise to newness of life yourself. It is the message through which God quickens dead men and causes them to be born again to a living hope. The gospel is essentially and completely then, a word of life.

This is the word of life and with it we are exhorted to do two things. First, we are to hold it fast, hold it tightly and securely. And you can only hold the word of life with hands of faith. To hold fast the word is to trust it without wavering and faltering in your faith. And notice this please, the object of your faith, that which you hold fast is the word of life. It is truth. And there is nothing that can substitute for truth, for the pure, unadulterated, authoritative word of God. You can’t replace it with people. People disappoint. I cannot count how many times I have heard of someone allegedly losing his faith because of what he saw Christians doing. But, listen, if you can lose your faith as a result of what another person does, then your faith was never right in the first place. It was built on changing flesh, not on solid rock. You cannot replace the word of life with people. You also can’t replace it with religious experience. It matters not if you have been healed, or spoken in tongues, or seen the face of Jesus in your taco, the question asked of you at judgment day will be what did you do with Jesus? Did you hold fast to His word of life, to those truths which were delivered unto you in the Holy Scriptures? And even if you clung to everything else, but let go of the truth, you lose. Hold fast the word of life and like a fullback running downfield with a football on Super-Bowl Sunday, you hold it tight because you are going to be assaulted and
attacked. Hold on to the truth though your feelings may shake you, though persecution attack you, though skeptics assail you. Hold it fast!

Different things shake the faith of different people. Some people are shaken by negative moods and emotions. They wake up one day and find that the thrill of their early religion is gone. The Bible seems dry, prayer seems routine. Their meaningful life in Jesus feels like a stroll through an immense desert. And the sacrifice of money, time and sensual pleasure seems too much. And they conclude that it must not be real and they turn from the truth to seek other things to fill the emotional void. Oh, my friend, don’t be shaken by your changing moods. CS Lewis defines faith as the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted in spite of your changing moods. He points out that atheists sometimes feel like Christianity must be true, and Christians sometimes feel like atheism must be true. In each case, the moods rebel against the real self. That is why faith is so necessary. Unless you teach your moods just where they get off you can never be a sound Christian or a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion. Brethren, amidst rocky moods, hold on to the sure and steady word of life.

Others are shaken and falter in faith at the attacks of the skeptics who, in the name of scholarship, or science, poke fun at the antiquated dogmas of Christian orthodoxy. Lies will flail at you from right and left. From TV ads to the college laboratory, to your nightly news to books like The DaVinci Code, which is a thinly veiled and unscholarly assault on the veracity of the New Testament. But contemporary fads, like that book, have and will come and go, while the word of life has always stood. But it’s a challenge to stand with a super-natural mysterious faith in our world. So, when doubts arise for me, (and they do), I know I can return to the confession of Peter in John 6. Jesus had been describing the mystery of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. He went on to teach about the doctrine of election and offended many who left Him because His words were hard to believe. Jesus asked Peter, “will you leave too?” And Peter’s response is classic, just so great. John 6:68 Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. He was holding fast to the words of life. You too. Don’t let anyone or anything strip you of the word of life and the joy offered therein.

Some are shaken by persecution. They discover that Christianity isn’t so popular with everyone. And the threat of losing friends and losing respect, and maybe even losing life is too much for them to take, and in order to cling to self and the self’s desires, they let go of the word of life.
And oh, oh, what a tragedy! No matter what has prompted it, when a man or woman loses grip on the word of life and renounces the faith, you have a tragedy of eternal significance. For, to release the word of life is death. I Corinthians 15:1-2 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. You are saved if you hold fast. You fail to keep trusting God’s word there is no salvation for you and all of your religiosity is worthless. Paul again implies in our text that if the Philippian Christians do not hold fast then all his evangelism and teaching and praying for them was in vain. How serious is this matter of holding fast the word of life? Nothing could be more serious. It is a matter of life and death. Deuteronomy 30:15-19 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; 16 in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. 17 "But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. 19 "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life.

Who here believes that God is pro-life? Who believes that God is pro-choice? This verse says He is both. My friend, our God is both pro-choice and pro-life. And He says “You choose” but He pleads with you and warns you to not be foolish, but to choose life. That is the only right choice. Read on with me. 19b-20b So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, 20 by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life. Amazing passage! The mouth of the Lord, dripping with earnestness, calls us to account and reminds us that life is made available for those who will go after it, seize it and never let it go.

Main point # 2 for today – holding out the word of life. The holding fast and holding out are, of course, intimately related. You can’t hold forth what you haven’t held on to. We must do both. Like stars must have light to give it off, so you must hold fast to hold out. And when you abandon the word of God, you no longer have anything to hold out for others. It is interesting to see that as major denominations in this country forsook the Bible, their missions efforts fizzled and died. Those
denominations that have made Biblical authority optional are withering on the vine – no they are
withering off the vine – precisely because they have detached themselves from the source of life.

But we must do both. Conservative Presbyterians have sometimes been guilty of protecting
our Biblical orthodoxy while lacking a passion to spread it. So, let’s hold that word out to a world
that desperately needs it. And consider this - we must not just be the audio so that people only hear
the gospel we hold forth. And we must not just be the video so that people only see the gospel which
we hold fast. We must be both and give to our dark world an audio-visual presentation of the word
of life, meaning that we speak it and we live it.

In case there is any doubt, the holding out of the word of life means inviting men to Christ. It
means preaching the gospel, which means announcing the life in Jesus Christ; it means evangelism.
This is a key to being a star. Are you a star? Do you hold out the word of life? You see, you are not
to hold the word of life like a baby, close in. No, you hold it out like a torch, to light the way for
others. Do you hold forth the word of life? As an individual? Paul told the Thessalonians that the
word of the Lord has sounded forth from you? Could he say that about this church? Ask yourself, are
we burning bright like a city set upon a hill or have we hid our lamp under a basket? Are we, are you
holding out the word of life to a world that is dead and dying? Some Christian people are so
concerned with clinging to conservative, Biblical orthodoxy. Faith of our fathers, holy faith, we will
be true to thee till death. But will we always keep it to ourselves? I’ve got a saying for you – good
news is for sharing. I remember that time in my life when I, in a sense, discovered the Bible and the
riches of the word of God. I was starting to understand the greatness of my Savior-God and my
constant prayer in those days was for more knowledge of God. Oh, Lord reveal to me Yourself,
reveal to me your truth. And I remember praying that one night on the beach at Daytona when God
said, Listen, you know enough already to save the world. Get out there and start telling others what
you already know. Don’t just hold the word fast, hold it out.

We are called to share it brethren. We have the word of life for dead and dying people. Do
you believe that Jesus Christ is the only hope for men and women who are perishing? We have the
message of life, how can we be silent? I get that you feel afraid. Does fear justify our silence? I was
just reading about Reeve Bett, the pioneer missionary doctor to India. One time he found a 10 year
old girl who needed surgery to live and she needed blood. But her own family in India refused to
donate blood to save her life. Why? They were afraid. You say, that’s terrible! You’re right! It is.
But what are you doing when people are dying all around you, and you have the word of life but won’t hold it out because you are afraid?

If a doctor discovered the cure for cancer, but didn’t tell anyone for fear of not being believed and maybe even being laughed at, what would you think of such a man? So what if some people scoff at the gospel. Paul said Romans 1:16 *I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.* The saving power of the word of life is ours to hold fast and it is ours also to hold forth to a desperate world. Now, I know it’s not so easy and I know it’s very hard. I know. But, I know that if you want to shine like stars for Christ, you have to burn for Christ. You can’t be afraid of the fire. Again, this week I ask, *you still want to be a star for Jesus?* Huh? Look at one more passage please. Daniel 12:2-3 *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.* 3 “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” You can lead unbelievers to righteousness or you can lead Christians to righteousness, but that is the work of spiritual stars.

Will you be a star? If so, you seek to do all things without grumbling and disputing, and you must also hold fast and hold forth the word of life. So, brothers and sisters, I invite you today, in the words of a children’s song to rise and shine and give God the glory, glory.