

I've told this story here before, so you may have heard it, but I think it's funny and challenging as well. It's about a man who had a rough time on his way to work one day. He said,

"I was sitting at a stop light this morning. The lady in front of me was distracted by texting or looking at social media on her phone. When the light changed to green she didn't go. A green light is a commandment - NOT a suggestion. I began (with my windows up) screaming at her and beating on my steering wheel. When the light turned to yellow, she finally saw it and went, but I was trapped there by a red light. I lost it. I opened my window and flipped her off and cussed her out, screaming in rage. My expression of distress was interrupted by a police officer, tapping on my window, asking me to step out of the car. I said, *"You can't arrest me for hollering in my own car,"* then he ordered me into the back seat of his. After about two hours in a holding cell, the arresting officer told me I was free to go. I said, *"I knew you couldn't arrest me for was yelling in my own car. You haven't heard the last of this."*

The officer replied, *"I didn't arrest you for shouting in your car. I was directly behind you at the light. I saw you screaming and beating your steering wheel, and I said to myself, "What a jerk. But I can't arrest him for throwing a fit in his own car."*

But then I noticed the 'Cross' hanging from your mirror, the bright yellow 'Choose Life' license tag, the 'Jesus is Coming Soon' bumper sticker, the "Follow Me to Sunday School" sign in the window, and the silver fish symbol on the trunk. So - naturally I assumed you'd stolen the car."

We've been studying the letter Paul wrote to Philippian (and to us) while he was imprisoned in Rome. At the end of chapter one, Paul concludes his discussion about living with joy in the midst of difficult circumstances. Here he gives us a focus for living that's simple yet profound;

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

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The Greek words used here were sometimes used to describe how Ambassadors ought to behave when they are sent to another country. They are told to remember that they represent their country so they should behave in ways that honor the reputation of their nation and the best practices of their people. In a similar way you might hear these words from a principal or coach when they say, *"you represent your school and community, so represent them well."*

What does it mean to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel? We could make a long list, but let's focus on what Paul says here. He tells the Philippians that he hopes to see or hear certain things about them which will demonstrate the sincerity of their faith.

First, he says he will hear that they are Standing Fast (or they're well anchored). The first thing we need to realize is that we are in a battle as Christians in a world that is largely in rebellion against the sovereignty of God. We will need to stand firm to hold our ground.

As believers we will face opposition from many fronts. We will be attacked by competing philosophies. We will face opposition from the values and morals of the world (or the lack of them). Everywhere we turn, we will face those who wish to weaken our foundations. We will face the constant temptation that comes from the Devil and his army. The person of faith, living worthy of the gospel, is one who is standing firm in the midst of real opposition.

If we are going to stand firm, we must be anchored to the right place. If you want to hang a heavy picture on the wall, don't just drive a nail into the drywall. Yes, it may hold for a while, but if the nail doesn't go into a stud, or into a molly or drywall anchor it will come out.

I think a key part of being well anchored is found in sound doctrine. Right living comes from right beliefs and not the other way around. We must make sure we understand who Jesus is, what He did, what He taught, how we find salvation, and what the Bible teaches in general. Many people say they don't like doctrine - they like doing more than knowing - but doctrine is the truth that we believe which determines what we will actually do, and how we will love. If we don't study doctrine, we will be nailing our faith to a spot that will not hold. We will be susceptible to corrupting our faith by neglectfully mixing it with worldly values and ways.

For example, sound Christian doctrine is rooted in an emphasis on grace. Grace can be defined as the undeserved love of God for sinful people and the priority of saving and redeeming them. To be clear, if we're children of God then we should share the values and priorities of our heavenly Father. One of those priorities is revealed in 1 Tim 2:4 which says "*God desires for all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*" BTW - Christ claimed to be "*truth.*" So, grace means we want all people to be saved and redeemed.

Here are some implications of that priority - it means Christians can't return evil for evil, we can't hate in response to hate, we can't do violence and injustice - particularly against innocent people - to protest violence and injustice. We can be angry about any number of things people do or have done - individually and systemically - but we can't use our anger as an excuse for sin. Jesus said to love even your enemies and to do good - not harm - even to those who've harmed you. If I may be so bold, I'm seeing too many Christians in our nation, on both ends of the political and social spectrum, who are not offering others the same kind of grace that God has offered to us in Christ. To "*conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel*" we need to be bearers and sharers of God's grace to everyone - no exceptions. We can't try to quibble over who is more or less deserving of it - because then it would no longer be about grace.

Second, Paul says those conducting themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel will seek to live in unity. The word for "contend as one" or "striving together" is the Greek word "sun-athleo" from which we get our word "athletic." Just as a team must work together to be victorious, so Paul says that Christians need to work together to fulfill our mission in the world.

Do you remember the film, "*Remember the Titans*"? It is a good film to watch these days.

It is based on the true story of two coaches, one white assistant coach, and one black head coach who are asked to lead a newly integrated team. The head coach (played by the excellent actor Denzel Washington) has to try to get this team to put aside their differences and focus on their common goal. As they begin to do this they begin to play better football, but they also begin to change into better people. This change for the better impacts an entire community.

The church is made up of people with different tastes, styles, interests, as well as diverse political and social opinions. We can let our differences divide us or we can let our common experience of grace in Christ unite us. Yes, in the quest for truth we may still debate issues - but our goal is not about being proven “right” or to prove that the other is “wrong.” Our goal must be knowing and loving Christ better so we can represent Him better in our relationships.

In the first century, the church of Christ was born in a very hostile environment. The dominant world views, religious beliefs, and moral standards were almost completely opposed to the values and teachings of Christ. They were persecuted, hated, and discriminated against on a daily basis. Did they take up weapons to tear down the power structures and to defend themselves? Did that demand special rights or recognition? No - they loved other people - undeserving people - in the same way that Christ loved them. It didn’t lead to the conversion of everyone, and some believers were martyred by the very people they were trying to save, but they choose to do good, and to love, and to be gracious. Before people understood the gospel of Christ, they understood that these Christians loved each other and they were committed to loving the neighbors. In the end, that grace is what got people’s attention and it led people to Christ so that they could be changed from being lost to being found. To conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, means we must be willing to set aside our ego and opinions for the purpose of advancing the gospel. We will overlook minor differences and discuss bigger differences in a spirit of grace. We may win a political battle but lose the war to save a soul. We need to remember that our priorities must match Gods’ - to seek and to save the lost.

The third characteristic of people living in a manner worthy of the Gospel is that they will live without fear. Again the Greek word that Paul uses helps us to understand. The word for “fear” is the same word that would be used for a horse that was startled. A startled horse takes off running. Christians who live in a manner worthy of the gospel will not give into fear.

Giving into fear, or letting fear dominate your life, is a sign that we’re struggling to fully trust God. When world events shake us that hard, it means we doubt that God is in control - or that God will eventually bring things together for good. When personal struggles, or world events, make us fearful, we need to remind ourselves, that God is still working for good in and through our circumstances (as bad as they may seem at the moment). Our confidence and hope courage is not rooted in our ability - which is just not nearly strong enough - it is rooted in God’s power and goodness. God is able. God has a plan. The future is in His hands.

Paul says, “*Conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel.*”

That sounds simple, but it's not. At the end of this passage Paul gives us some help about how we can do this. Paul points to two things that can adjust our attitudes in this direction.

First, we are Privileged to Believe - or - to enjoy a saving relationship with Christ.

Every military person I've ever known, feels a special sense of pride whenever they don the uniform of their country. Most veterans, they still have their uniforms somewhere, even if it was last worn decades before. Why not toss out an old uniform when they leave the service or can no longer fit into it? They don't throw it away because it was a special honor to wear the uniform that so many have worn in defense of our country. It's an honor to serve your country.

In a like manner, those of us who wear the name of Christ, should realize what a privilege and honor it is to be called a child of God and an ambassador of the gospel in this world.

- It is an honor to be given a gift as wonderful as grace - to enjoy and to share.
- It is an honor to be granted eternal access to the Father.
- It is an honor to be forgiven and loved and adopted into God's family
- It is an honor to serve the one who is the maker of heaven and of earth
- It is an honor to be a part of the church - the vanguard of the Kingdom of God on earth

When we begin thinking of discipleship as a "duty" we begin to resist. When we begin to think of discipleship as "a right" we begin to be demanding. So, we must remind ourselves over and over that we stand in a grace that we don't deserve. We are gifted and blessed. We have a status we will never be worthy of, but that God has graciously bestowed upon us. The honor we have been given should make us more determined than ever to live up to that honor.

The second attitude - or privilege is much more difficult to accept. Paul says we have not only been granted to the privilege to believe. We are also granted the privilege **to Suffer**. That doesn't sound like much a privilege! In fact, in our nation, it still sounds pretty foreign to our ears! We hear of Christians facing persecution or suffering in other places, but up until now, or at least for the past two centuries we've been more or less immune from it here. In fact, many people have flocked to Christianity because they believe it will end their suffering. Prosperity preachers have thrived in the USA because when you say that Christianity will make the old "American Dream" possible then people want to buy it. It sounds good - sign me up!

Of course, there is truth in the fact that Christianity will make us prosper - but it doesn't usually match what our culture defines as success or values. When we come to Christ, we are made right with God - and that begins to cure the rot in our souls which leaves people always hungry but never satisfied. We prosper because we begin to learn that real fulfillment is found in knowing and loving God. God revealed the truth to St. Augustine who said, "*Oh God, thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.*" I don't have time to go into all the benefits of having a right relationship with God, both in this life and the next, but I can say with assurance that it's the only life worth living.

When we come to Christ, the torment within our soul begins to be healed, but our struggle without - our conflict with the world - may just be beginning. For at least the past 25 years, I've been thinking that the favored status of Christians in this nation was passing away. Now, I am sorry to say that what once may have been prophetic, now seems painfully obvious. The current of Western Culture and Christianity are now moving in opposite directions with respect to worldview, values, morals, spiritual beliefs, sexual ethics, and the methods we should use to change the world into what we think it ought to be. So, welcome to the mainstream experience of global Christianity! Our diminished status just means we are now in alignment with most Christians in history and even in the rest of the world today. It also means we may be on the verge of a revival and a more powerful witness to the world than what a watered down culturally compatible Christianity has produced. In Christian history we can often see a law of physics working in a spiritual way - if you increase the heat you can increase the expansion.

But church growth is not really our motivation, even though we want to help as many get saved as possible. Our real motivation is that we want to be faithful to Christ because we owe Him our lives, and if need be, our deaths. We know Christ has promised to raise up into eternal life - so to sacrifice for him, to suffer if need be - is the least we can do in grateful response.

Try to understand how suffering could be seen as a privilege. Suppose you have a child who is in desperate health. As a parent, would you willingly endure personal suffering on their behalf? I suspect you would. You would go without sleeping. You would sacrifice a body part. You would spend your life savings. You would even give up your own life if it could save your child. You would willingly and gladly suffer out of your love for your child. And if someone asked you, you'd tell them that you would do it all again because of your love.

This is the way we should view Christ. We should love Him enough to suffer anything for the honor of His name. It is not a curse to suffer for Christ. It is a privilege to be able to demonstrate our love for Him. What an honor to think that others might see Him in us.

Paul could see the handwriting on the wall. He sensed that the Philippians might soon be persecuted for their faith. In AD 67, to undermine the power of the senate, the emperor Nero secretly ordered the burning of Rome. The fire lasted nine days, and when it was over Nero blamed the Christians and came at them with vengeance, launching the first great widespread persecution of Christians in the Roman empire. Nero contrived all manners of gruesome punishments for the Christians that only the most evil imagination could design. In the course of it, the apostles' Paul and Peter were martyred. [Foxe's Book of Martyrs, John Foxe]

In Hebrews 11:35-38, we read that they the early believers,

“. . . were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated - the world was not worthy of them.”

That last line has always struck me as profound... “*the world was not worthy of them.*”

In each of these cases, the people considered it an honor to suffer for Christ. We should hope that we will never be called to suffer for Christ in such ways. But even if we are, we should pray that we might face those times as those who have gone before us - seeing it as an honor to demonstrate our faithfulness to Christ and to be His witness. It is much more likely that you and I will face more subtle forms of persecution for our faith. For example:

- we may lose our job
- we may face lawsuits
- we may be ostracized by family or friends
- we may be verbally abused or even physically attacked
- we may face business losses
- we may be ignored by people we wish noticed us
- we may be discriminated against
- we may be cancelled from a place of honor in popular culture

Whatever suffering that may come from being united with Christ (and not from our arrogance, or stupidity, or laziness, or divisiveness), we should count it a privilege to stand up for Him.

Paul says two main things will happen if we live in a manner that is worthy of the gospel.

First, we will verify our Salvation. The world looks at how we handle the tough times to find out whether or not our profession of faith is real or not. Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount that the way to distinguish true prophets from false prophets is by the way they live. I think Jesus would say the same thing of His disciples. A true believer shows they are a true believer by the way they live and by the way they respond to the hardships of life.

However, I must make some important clarifications. Namely, we are admitted to Heaven on the basis of what Christ has done for us, and not on the basis of what we do. We don't have to “be good” in order to be saved. However, the person who trusts in Christ, is a person in whom the Spirit of God now dwells, which means that person will begin to change from bad to good. It is essential that we keep the order right in our head. We are granted eternal life on the basis of our trust in Christ's work . . . then by the power of God we are changed.

Next, it's important to understand that no Christian is going to live a perfect life. I've never met a perfect Christian. Every believer will stumble and fall on occasion. We're people in the process of transformation into Holiness - we're not done yet. We must give each other time and cut each other some slack. When we look for the evidence (the fruit) of a genuine conversion, we must look for it over a long period of time. BTW - if we are going to spend much time on fruit inspection - we need to do that on ourselves much more than we do that for others. A person who lives consistently for Christ will show that their conversion was genuine.

I want to share three final applications.

First, we must take the time to reflect on the privilege and honor that are ours in being children of God. Many of you have grown up in the church and take it for granted. Others have been believers for a long time but we've forgotten where we were and where we were headed when God saved us. So, take some time to consider where you might be today if it weren't for God's grace. Think about what your future would hold. Think about all the things you would have missed. Focus on the blessing that is yours to know Christ personally.

Second, do a personal inventory of your life. What practices are inconsistent with the gospel of Christ? What things do you say or do which dishonor his name? Be honest. It's going to hurt, but it is necessary. Look at your vocabulary, your thought life, your passions, your priorities. Look at the way you are with other Christians and compare it to the way you are with your non-Christian family or friends. Is there inconsistency there? If so repent and walk more closely with Christ. When you do, your joy will be greater as you go.

Third, find some way to remind yourself of who you represent. Maybe it could be a Bible verse or plaque hung in strategic spots. Maybe you could put a little sign on your mirror that asks, "*How will people see Christ in me today?*" Or that says, "*I am a child of God and Christ's ambassador!*" Maybe it will be a pin you wear or a cross you carry in your pocket. Maybe you could put a Bible on your desk or carry a key chain with a Christian symbol on it. I wear these little bracelets... Whatever it is, consciously use it to remind yourself that your purpose is to live a life worthy of the gospel.

Finally, make this a matter of prayer. Ask God to help you live out the gospel wherever you are and through whatever circumstances you are going through. Ask God to help you to reflect His goodness and grace to others. Ask Him to give you hope and courage and endurance. Prayer builds our relationship with God - which helps live for Him more consistently with joy.

Next week we'll finally move on to Philippians chapter 2. It is a shorter chapter so we will be there for just three weeks - but please read chapter 2, especially verses 1-5 to get ready.