

**"Pressing on with the Mission"
Put the Gospel First, Part 3
Philippians 1:15-26**

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Getting the story right is important. Author [Mark Dever](#) tells the true story of an English newspaper editor who opened an edition of his paper after it had already been printed and sold. What the editor read was an embarrassing typographical error, the merging of two stories, one about a patented pig-killing sausage-making machine, and the other about a gathering in honor of a local clergyman, the Reverend Doctor Mudge. The story, in part, read as follows.
- “Several of Rev. Dr. Mudge’s friends called upon him yesterday, and after a conversation the unsuspecting pig was seized by the hind leg, and slid along a beam until he reached the hot-water tank....Thereupon he came forward and said that there were times when the feelings overpowered one, and for that reason he would not attempt to do more than thank those around him for the manner in which such a huge animal was cut into fragments was simply astonishing. The doctor concluded his remarks, when the machine seized him and, in less time than it takes to write it, the pig was cut into fragments and worked up into a delicious sausage. The occasion will be long remembered by the doctor’s friends as one of the most delightful of their lives. The best pieces can be procured for tenpence a pound, and we are sure that those who have sat so long under his ministry will rejoice that he has been treated so handsomely.”¹
- We laugh, but listen. God has entrusted to us the greatest news in the world and many of us struggle to explain this thing called the gospel. Getting the story right is important. You and I getting our story, the gospel is important. The gospel isn’t that deep down we are all okay and all that we need is an awakening of some inner consciousness. The gospel isn’t that God is love so that it doesn’t really matter how we live—he’ll accept us anyway. The gospel isn’t Jesus wants to be our friend. The gospel isn’t that we need to try and live good moral lives.
- The good news, the gospel is that the one and only God, who is holy, created us in his image to know him. But we rebelled against him, something God calls sin, and cut ourselves off from him. Compelled by love, God became a man in Jesus, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross. Through his death Jesus fulfilled God’s law by taking on himself the punishment for our rebellion. Jesus rose again from the dead showing that God accepted Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf and that God’s wrath against us has been exhausted. God now calls everyone, everywhere to repent, to acknowledge this rebellion, to trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness, and to begin living under his rule. When by faith we do this God brings us into new life, an eternal relationship with Him.² A life in which everything is different. That’s the gospel.

¹ Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, p. 31-2.

² Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, p. 43.

- And it is this gospel that the Apostle Paul staked his life on. All that Paul does, how he thinks, the plans he makes, the connections and relationships he forms, everything is filtered through this gospel. The same needs to be true for us. [Slide #2]

Big Idea

- **Put the gospel first in all things**
- The opening of Paul’s letter to the Philippians models for us firsthand what it means to put the gospel first in all things. Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church is seen as a partnership centered on the common bond of the gospel. **Philippians 1:4** *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. “Throughout the letter there is a harmony between writer and readers and a series of glimpses of what it is to work together in the cause of Christ.”³ But more than that, Paul’s prayers for the church are prayers founded upon the gospel. His ambitions in life are gospel centered ambitions.*

Transition

And now in verse 15. Look at what Paul says in **verse 15**. He models for us what it is to **put the gospel first in his circumstances**. [Slide #3]

Main Points

- Listen again. **15-18**. *It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. 16 The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 18 But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.*
- Last week I briefly mentioned Paul’s imprisonment. He penned this letter to the Philippians from a prison somewhere either in Rome, Ephesus, we’re not really sure. But prison wasn’t even the worst of it. While in prison, on the outside, a group of preachers had most likely become upset because they believed Paul had done damage to the Christian cause by getting himself arrested.⁴
- And so Paul says they began to *preach Christ out of selfish ambition* for the purpose of stirring trouble up for him even while he sat in prison. Their goal was, through preaching Christ, to irritate him, to make things harder for Paul while in prison.
- His circumstances, both in and out of prison, are about as unfavorable as you can get. And yet the way Paul views his circumstances is astounding. He rejoices, right? **Verse 18**. *And because of this I rejoice*. Rejoice at the fact that he’s in prison? No. That outside prison troublemakers are working to make it harder for him? No. He rejoices that regardless of the circumstances, and even because of the circumstances, the gospel was spreading and advancing. **Verse 17**. *The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.*

³ Carson, Moo and Morris, p. 328.

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p. 25.

- How does Paul handle this opposition? Paul rejoices. He submitted his own circumstances to those of the wider horizon of the gospel.⁵
- The lesson for us is this. The mission Jesus launched must continue amid the crud and the bummers and the disappointments and the setbacks of life. If the mission can only move forward in blue sky zippity do da what a wonderful life kind of environments then the mission isn't going to get very far.
- As each of us continues to step out and onto the mission Jesus launched we have got to remember that God is sovereign. He has a plan to exalt and magnify Christ. And if you are a Christian believer then your whole life has been swept up and into this story. Your life becomes a part of God's plan. So when stuff happens it isn't just stuff happening. God is at work.
- So put the gospel first in your circumstances and trust that God is bigger than your circumstances. This means more than just seeing the silver lining things, more than putting a positive spin on things, more than blessings in disguise. That's not what Paul does here. And that's not what we're asked to do. We're not asked to smile and grit our way through the hand we've been dealt. It's not about what we do with negative circumstances. It's about what God does and is doing.
- Your circumstances, albeit negative, difficult and painful, are the very things that God will use to advance the gospel. So we can, like Paul, rejoice.
- Singer-songwriter [Jennifer Rothschild](#) began to lose her sight by the age of 12. When she was in the 9th grade doctors at the [Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami](#) diagnosed her with [retinitis pigmentosa](#). The prognosis was total blindness.
- Now an adult Rothschild says, “One of the hardest lessons I've had to learn is that God uses painful circumstances in our lives for good. My hero, [Joni Eareckson Tada](#), who has been in a wheelchair since she was a teenager, makes this point well when she says that God allows what he hates in order to accomplish what he loves. I know that God's heart is broken when he sees our hearts break. I believe that just as Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus weeps when he sees us cry tears of loss. I'm convinced that God is well acquainted with the sorrow and struggles that I experience. Yet, at the same time, he loves me enough—and this is why I'm so loyal to him—to let me encounter sorrow, taste bitter emotions, and feel loss. He trusts me to be a good steward of that sorrow. He loves me enough to let me experience that pain so that he can accomplish something he loves—which for me has been a deeper character and a more eternal perspective.”
- “I am convinced that God's grace has sustained me. If healing were sufficient, God would have provided it. If deliverance were sufficient, God would have delivered me. But he's allowed me to live with blindness, yet live equally with the sufficiency of his grace, and that grace shows up in different ways on different days. But in whatever way it shows up, it has always been truly sufficient. It may never be well with our circumstances, but through God's grace, it can always be well with our souls.”⁶

⁵ O'Brien, p. 107.

⁶ *Decision Magazine*, May 2007, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, ©2007

- Of all the things to be thankful for this week. **Put the gospel first in your circumstances** and give thanks.

Transition

There is yet another area of life in which Paul puts the gospel first. Look at [verses 18-26](#). **Put the gospel first in your life-long service of others.** [Slide #4]

- Listen again. [Verse 18](#). *Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. 20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.*
- Almost immediately our eyes zero in on verse 21. The famous verse. A great verse. But I want you to zero in on [verse 20](#). Paul’s circumstances, the imprisonment, the trouble caused by people on the outside made things so difficult for him that he had thoughts of giving up. The temptation for Paul to abandon the gospel, the source of all his trouble, was real. He speaks of not wanting to be ashamed; ashamed of turning his back on Christ. He speaks of needing courage, courage to persevere. Realistically, who in Paul’s shoes wouldn’t think this way?
- But instead of giving up on either Christ or the gospel what does he say? *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* Paul eagerly expects not to abandon the gospel or Christ. He has this keen anticipation as he cranes his neck to peer into the future of his life that through the prayers of the Philippian church and the help offered him by the Holy Spirit that his life will magnify Christ whether he lives or dies.⁷
- For Paul, either one, in living or in dying, his life is all about Christ. [Verse 21](#). *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* In other words, for Paul to go on living is to serve Christ. In context, *to live is Christ* means that for Paul life is ministry to others, Christ-centered ministry, Christ-empowered service.⁸ *To live is Christ.* To live is tantamount to serving Christ. His life is serving Christ. Who or what are you serving with your life?
- And should he die, Paul says that that too is about Christ. *Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.* To die would mean being with Christ—which is better. But more important than his selfish desire to be with Christ is his continued living and service of Christ in life which is why he says in [verse 24](#) *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.*
- More important than what Paul wants or desires is the progress of the gospel in the lives of the Philippians. *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of*

⁷ Martin, p. 78.

⁸ Carson, p. 29.

you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

- What’s most important to Paul? His life? His circumstances? His imprisonment? His wants? His needs? No. The church. The body.
- Recently [Floyd Hacker](#) passed on to me his old personalized license plate. It sums up what Paul is getting at in these verses.
- Too frequently we evaluate and make decisions in life by answering the question what’s best for me, for my family, for my career, for my advancement, for my sanity? When faced with a job offer or a move or any other major decision, how often do we do what Paul does here? In thinking about the future, his future Paul makes his mind up about what to do by asking what’s best for others. What’s best for my brothers and sisters in Christ? What’s best for the gospel? To press on with the mission Jesus launched is to use these questions as the guiding questions in our decision making.⁹
- Put the gospel first in your relationships. Put the gospel first in your prayers. Put the gospel first in your ambitions. Put the gospel first in your circumstances. Put the gospel first in your service of others. By all means, whatever you do in this life put the gospel first.

Conclusion

- In a day and age where putting the gospel first is not the norm, even in Christian circles, it would be wise of us to think about the kind of legacy we’re leaving. What do you want people to say about you? What will your kids remember about you when they are all grown up? What will your grandkids say about you?
- [D.A. Carson](#) recalls the words of “an aging Christian to [John G. Paton](#) in the last century when Paton was planning to go as a missionary to the South Seas Islands. ‘You will be eaten by cannibals!’ Paton was warned. Paton replied, ‘Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.’”¹⁰ Put the gospel first!

⁹ Carson, p. 30.

¹⁰ *John G. Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography Edited by His Brother*, ed. James Paton (New York: Revell, 1907; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965, 56 (of reprint edition)).