

"Pressing on with the Mission" The Gospel First Philippians 1:9-14

Introduction

- [Video] [Slide #1] I'm absolutely convinced that for many people, for many of us, being a Christian, following Christ, whatever you want to call it, has made no real and lasting difference to our lives, aka plastic Jesus, because of one thing. We don't know what the gospel is.
- Anything less than the gospel first in all things not only gets us plastic Jesus—it sidelines the mission Jesus launched. Think about it like this. What good is it to be on the mission Jesus launched if what people see in us as they read the letters of our lives, if the Jesus they see in us has made no real and lasting difference? What good is being on the mission?
- Conversely, to be on the mission Jesus launched and to have others read in us and see in us a real and authentic and vibrant faith; a living, resurrected Jesus that has changed who we are, our priorities, what we're about—there's nothing more powerful. To the degree that our lives are oriented around the gospel determines the kind of Jesus people see in us.
- And to the degree that the gospel becomes central to everything we're about will determine whether the mission Jesus launched will be for us a fly by night affair or something sustainable long-term.

Transition

Last week we began this journey through Philippians, this letter from Paul about pressing on with the mission, by talking about the centrality of the gospel. [Slide #2]

Big Idea

- **Pressing on with the mission means putting the gospel first in all things**
- [Slide #3] Part of pressing on with the mission means **putting the gospel first in our prayers**. Cheap, dollar store prayers, like cheap dollar store batteries won't energize us for mission long-term. Look at what Paul prays in [verse 9](#).

Main Points

- *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God.*
- Paul's prayer for the Philippians is that they might grow in love, not that they might grow solely in their affections for other people—which certainly wouldn't be a bad thing to pray, but specifically that their love might grow richer in knowledge and insight. *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.*

- I like how the [ESV](#) translates this verse because it teases this idea out. *And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.* Don't you find that an interesting thing to pray about for someone else? *And this is my prayer: that Carl's love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.* *And this is my prayer: that Susan's love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.* Frankly, that is so different than how we normally pray for people, isn't it? Most of our prayers for others are consumed with needs and wants. So and so needs this God. So and so wants this.
- Paul has something else in mind. He says the better kind of prayer to pray is that a person's love might grow in knowledge and depth of insight. More knowledgeable about God that is. "The kind of love Paul has in mind is the kind of love that becomes more knowledgeable."¹
- As [D.A. Carson](#) puts it Paul is not thinking of just any kind of knowledge. He is not hoping they will learn more and more about nuclear physics or sea turtles. He has in mind the knowledge of God; Paul wants the Philippians to enjoy insight into God's words and ways, and to know how to live in light of those words and ways.²
- Paul's assumption is that love that grows in knowledge about God changes a person. Because, unlike learning about sea turtles which probably won't change anybody's life, you can't genuinely grow in knowledge about God without being significantly changed. That kind of real knowledge of God leads to repentance and to long-term sustainable change.
- In fact, Paul says there are twin results of growing in this love that is more knowledgeable. Look at [verse 10](#). He says in [verse 10](#) that this kind of knowledgeable love helps people to discern what is best and it helps them to be pure and blameless. Twin results. Discernment and purity. *So that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.* Those are the products of growing in knowledge about God.
- That word, discern, it means to put to the test. The idea then is that as we grow in this love that is more knowledgeable about God we are able to put to the test, to discern the things that really matter.³ I don't know about you but I know a whole lot of people who have spent a whole lot of time on things that don't really matter.
- Does the name [Roy Regals](#) ring a bell? Regals was a center for the University of California in 1929 when Cal played against Georgia Tech at the Rose Bowl. For some time the game was scoreless until Regals picked a fumble and headed for the wrong end zone. A teammate chased him down and tackled him at the one yard line. On the very next play Regals' quarterback was sacked in the end zone for a safety. The team lost the game to Georgia Tech by one point and ever since then, Roy Regals has been known as Wrong Way Regals.

¹ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p. 20.

² D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p. 20.

³ Ralph Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, p. 67.

- After the game Regals said he had heard his teammate behind him yelling, "You're going the wrong way," but thought, *What's wrong with him?* One sports writer said of Regals: "He had instincts without direction."⁴
- Without growing in knowledge about God which helps us discern and know and test what is right we we're like Wrong Way Regals—running through life in the wrong direction. Instincts without direction equal disaster. We may hear people yelling to us "you're going the wrong way in life." And we may need people from time to time to run us down and tackle us so that we don't run headlong into disaster. But more than anything us what we need is prayer. Prayers that you and I might be filled more and more with a knowledge about God that leads to the ability to test and discern what is right in this life; so that we might know the right way to run in life. That's what Paul prays for here.
- Think about this in terms of the mission, in terms of loving other people as Jesus loved them and making disciples—but doing so without discernment. The implication is that there is such a thing as love without knowledge and insight. The implication is that love alone, without an accompanying knowledge of God, is insufficient because that love may be misdirected towards the wrong objects or it can treat the objects of its affection in inappropriate ways.⁵ Think for a second, can you see how the mission might be hindered by misdirected undiscerning love?
- The other result, Paul says, of this knowledgeable love is purity—also [verse 10](#). *So that you may be pure and blameless*. I think Paul uses those two terms pure and blameless interchangeably. What Paul seems to be saying is that the more we grow in the knowledge of who God is, the more our love will be sincere, pure, blameless.
- All of what Paul prays is gospel centered, isn't it? I'm sure the Philippians had a whole lot of stuff they needed. More than the physical needs or challenges they faced Paul sensed that in order for the Philippians to stay on the mission they needed this discerning, pure, knowledgeable love. He puts the gospel first in his prayers—for their benefit. And the end result in the lives of the Philippians, as says in [verse 11](#), is the kind of fruit of a changed life that brings *glory and praise of God*. No plastic Jesus here.
- More than we realize, spiritual growth and development in Christ is dependent upon prayer. The reason so many of us, myself included, struggle with a real, authentic faith is because we aren't putting the gospel first in our prayers. What's produced in our lives is a plastic Jesus kind of faith that makes no difference whatsoever. May we put the gospel first in our prayers.

Transition

There's another aspect to putting the gospel first. Look at [verses 12-14](#). [[Slide #4](#)] Paul says in order to stay on the mission Jesus launched we need to **put the gospel first in our ambitions**.

- Listen. *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 Because of my chains, most of the*

⁴ Ralph Martin, *Philippians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, p. 67.

⁵ Howard Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 16.

brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

- Verses 12-14 give us a small but personal glimpse into Paul’s life. Look at what he tells us about himself. We know he is in prison, [verse 13](#), in some palace; an Imperial Roman outpost such that Paul can say when he closes his letter, [Philippians 4:22](#), *All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.* We don’t really know where exactly this prison within Caesar’s household is. Tradition says it’s Rome. It could also be Herod’s palace in the city of Caesarea—a place that would also qualify as belonging to Caesar’s house. It could even be Ephesus. We’re not really sure. And it doesn’t really matter. What matters is how Paul viewed his imprisonment. He says he is *in chains for Christ*, again [verse 13](#). He’s in chains because of putting the gospel first.
- Even though Paul was a Roman citizen he spent roughly one-quarter of his missionary career in prisons. Historian [John McRay](#) gives us a glimpse of what it was like to be in a Roman prison. He says, “Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged—a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter. Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide.”⁶
- Paul says all that had happened to him, the chains, the discomfort, the adversity, whatever, happened so that the gospel could be advanced. *Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.* All the stuff that we and probably the Philippians perceived as negative circumstances, barriers, hindrances, frustrations—all those things served to advance the gospel. “Paul did not merely say that the gospel had continued to make progress in spite of adversity; rather, the adversity itself had turned out for the advancement of the gospel.”⁷
- That’s remarkable, isn’t it? What’s maybe even more remarkable is the ripple effect this had on the lives of others. [Verse 14](#). *Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*
- Paul was a man with a singular ambition. He lived and breathed and worked and toiled, he labored to see the gospel, the good news of Christ crucified for sins, advance. That was his ambition. The goal of seeing the gospel advance overrode everything else in life; his personal inconveniences, sufferings, and even imprisonment served this end of seeing the gospel advance.⁸
- I want you to notice something. These words here are as personal as Paul gets. He makes numerous first person “I” statements. Notice this though. Notice how even with all these “I” statements Paul tells us remarkably little about himself. We don’t really learn much about the man Paul, do we? Why? The answer’s telling. “Paul’s personal life is so completely taken up with his ambition to see the gospel advance that to reflect on how his imprisonment

⁶ *Christian History*, Issue 47, June 1, 2002.

⁷ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Second Edition, p. 62.

⁸ Peter O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 86.

has furthered the gospel is to reflect on his life!"⁹ This thing, the gospel and his life have been woven together. To hear Paul speak of his life is to hear about the gospel. The gospel is his life.

- When we talk about our dreams and ambitions and plans and aspirations we do so in such a way as to describe them as separate from the advance of the gospel. Don't we? Not Paul. His life was the gospel.
- Seriously, what are your ambitions in life? To make money? To find a spouse? To travel the world? To ace every exam? To spend as much time with your grandchildren as humanly possible? To find a new job? To retire early? None of these are wrong in and of themselves. The question is whether these ambitions become so devouring that the Christian's central ambition is squeezed to the periphery or choked out of existence altogether.¹⁰
- If the goal is to be on and stay on the mission Jesus launched the gospel must be first in your ambitions.
- *Now, brothers [and sisters], I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*¹¹ *For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.*¹²
- The gospel isn't that you can be happier if you follow God's principles. The gospel isn't pray more, read the bible more, evangelize more. The gospel isn't what would Jesus do? The gospel is that Jesus has already done it. The gospel isn't make Jesus Lord and Savior—as if we have the power to make God something. He is Savior and Lord. And the good news is that this Savior has liberated, saved us from bondage to sin.
- The gospel isn't follow Jesus' example or how to raise good children or six steps to a better marriage. The gospel is that Jesus Christ came to save sinners—even bad parents, even lousy followers of Jesus.¹³ The gospel, the good news, is that by the grace of God we are offered a righteousness that's not our own, a righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. This is the gospel that must be put first. In everything. This is the gospel that changes lives.

Conclusion

- Vancouver, BC February 2010. The Winter Olympics. Believe it or not, one of my favorite Winter Olympic sports is curling. Shuffleboard on ice; there's something magical about it.

⁹ Fee, p. 108.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p. 25-6.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

¹² Romans 1:17

¹³ Illustrations of what the gospel is or isn't taken from the article by Mark Galli, "Christ at the Center," *Christianity Today*, November 2009, p.47-49.

- The goal of curling is to deliver the curling stone, known as the rock, to a target called the house. When a rock is delivered, two players follow the rock ready to sweep its path, if needed. Sweeping is done for two reasons: either to make the rock travel farther, or to make the rock travel straighter, or both. The last rock thrown in an end, or inning, is called the hammer.
- That, in a nutshell, describes what Paul is trying to do with this letter. Sweep away all the impediments of life that draw us and church away from the target of the gospel and off the mission so that in the end, Christ, the rock, the hammer, the only thing of worth that we have to offer this world, is safely and successfully delivered to the house. Put the gospel first. Will you pray with me?