

IV. Lesson 4: To Advance the Gospel/Mixed Motives – Phil. 1:12-18a

October 18/19, 2006

Aim: To be aware of the effects our attitudes have on our Christian service.

A. To Advance the Gospel (Phil. 1:12-14)

It was characteristic of Paul to fix his mind on the purposes of God in his life rather than on his immediate circumstances (in this case, prison). Like Jesus, Paul was more concerned about others (here the Philippians) than about his own comfort. He practiced what he preached (*cf.* 2:4). But more than that, he knew that God invariably means to bring new blessings out of the trials and difficulties that His servants experience. In these verses he mentions several ways in which this was actually happening.

- *How did Paul know that God meant to bring blessing out of his suffering? In what other passages does he emphasize this? Is the same principle illustrated in the lives of others in Scripture? What difference does this make to our attitude to adversity?*

1. The Advance of the Gospel (1:12)

‘Now I write to you’ suggests that the Philippians may have either written or sent a message by Epaphroditus (2:25) to express their concern about Paul’s safety and welfare.

Paul was a prisoner of the Roman authorities. How could Paul possibly give thanks in the midst of such a difficulty? We will never understand this until we understand how Paul loved the gospel of Jesus Christ. From a human point of view his freedom had been curbed and therefore his evangelistic mission seemed to be at an end. But in fact, as Paul now realized, his imprisonment was part of the divine strategy to advance the gospel by bringing it to people who otherwise would never hear it.

The word which is translated as ‘furtherance’ or ‘advance’ (*prokopen*) is a military word. It was used of scouts who were sent out ahead of the main army. Their job was to prepare the way so that obstructions and dangers would not hinder the progress of the military legions. Paul had come to Rome with a similar mission, for the ‘furtherance of the gospel.’

How could the good news about Christ break into the world of the Roman army? Only if Paul were to have extended periods in the company of Roman soldiers! Prison was the ideal setting for such an evangelistic outreach! Because he had not committed a flagrant crime and he was not a political prisoner who was trying to overthrow the Roman authorities, Paul was allowed to be kept in his own rented house (Acts 28:30). It is very likely that he was chained twenty-four hours per day to a Roman guard, each guard on shift lasting six hours (*cp.* Acts 28:16). The Philippians, of all people, knew that God did unexpected things in prisons (Acts 16:22-34). God’s servants may be imprisoned, but the word of God can never be chained (see 2 Tim. 2:9).

- *What does the gospel mean to us? Does it mean enough that we are willing to suffer hardship in order for it to prosper? Or do we put our own comfort and ease above the gospel?*

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2. Manifestation of Christ (1:13)

As a result of Paul's imprisonment 'the whole imperial guard' had come to realize that his imprisonment was 'for Christ.' The 'praetorian guard' (*praetorio*) were soldiers of both high quality and long experience. They soon learned that the reason for his imprisonment: his only crime was loyalty to Christ. We may assume that the way in which Paul conducted himself (see Acts 28:30-31) had a profound effect on those guards. The gospel succeeded so admirably that Paul was able to include these words in the conclusion of this letter: 'All the saints greet you, but especially those who are of Caesar's household' (4:22).

Our translations suggest that Paul wrote that he was imprisoned 'for Christ.' That was certainly true. But in fact, Paul uses his favorite phrase 'in Christ.' He is a prisoner because of his union with Christ.

It was assurance that his Savior reigned that gave Paul such a glorious sense of usefulness even when, humanly speaking, all usefulness was denied him. Paul's example teaches us to view every situation in which we find ourselves as an opportunity to spread the gospel. There is surely a vital practical lesson here: we can trust Christ's purposes, even when we do not yet fully understand them (see John 13:7).

- *How should we respond when — unlike Paul's experiences here — it does not become clear why we experience adversity? How can it become evident in our everyday life that, like Paul, we experience everything 'for Christ'?*

3. The Church Encouraged (1:14)

Paul's imprisonment also served to advance the gospel by the encouraging effect his chains had on those in Rome who were already believers. We know that there was a church in Rome for some years before Paul came there, because they are the recipients of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Paul's experience in prison had encouraged his fellow-Christians to such an extent that they were now sharing the gospel with others boldly and 'without fear' (*aphobos*). The words 'confident' (*pepoithesis*) and 'bold' (*tolman*) suggest this new upsurge of witness was not the result of difficulties being eased for believers. The truth was rather that they were facing up to those difficulties and were now willing to speak for Christ whatever the consequences might be. If personal deprivation (imprisonment) led to fruitful witness for Paul, then they could trust that the Lord could work in the same way in their own lives.

God is not waiting for circumstances to be right; He is committed to producing really effective Christians, whatever their circumstances may be. Does that teach us something about our own Christian witness, and our own circumstances?

- *Paul saw that his response to his circumstances influenced others. Did Paul allow that possibility to influence his behavior here or at other times?*
- *In what context is it a biblical principle that the reaction of others should influence our behavior (see Rom. 14:1-15:3; 1 Cor; 8:1-13)? What principles for Christian conduct are involved here?*

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B. Mixed Motives (Phil. 1:15-18a)

The apostle is not like some leaders in the church who feel under obligation to tell their supporters only news of success. He realized that his relationship with the Philippians required honesty and openness. The truth was that mixed motives were involved in the increase of the preaching of Christ.

1. The Ugliness of False Motives (1:15a, 16)

Our instinctive reaction is that it is impossible to preach Christ out of ‘envy’ (*phthonos*) and ‘strife’ or ‘rivalry’ (*eris*). For that reason, interpreters have sometimes understood Paul to be speaking of false teachers. But Paul could not have rejoiced in that. These teachers did not belong to the group of people whom Paul later describes as ‘dogs ... who do evil’ (3:2). They were not those who were preaching a different gospel (Gal. 1:6), or another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4). These were genuine Christians who were truly preaching Jesus Christ, but they were not very gracious towards Paul or his work. Paul’s coming to Rome had evidently ‘put their noses out of joint.’

It is possible to preach the gospel with false motives or ‘pretense’ (*prophasis*, v. 18) (*cp.* Mt. 7:22). Their motive was ‘selfish ambition’ (*epitheias*). Perhaps, for example, some were preaching in the hope that they would be able to usurp Paul’s authority and gain positions of influence in the churches in his absence. Perhaps they were rather like Diotrephes of whom John writes: ‘Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us’ (3 John 9). In any case, they were ‘not sincere’ (*agnos*, root meaning ignorance) in their preaching.

Whoever they were, these preachers wanted to ‘afflict’ Paul while he was in prison. The word ‘afflict’ (*thlipsis*) means to cause friction or pressure. It brings to mind the vivid image of the painful rubbing of iron chains on a prisoner’s hands and legs. Paul certainly knew about that!

Rivalry and ambition among preachers is a reality, and this reality exists because preachers are not as good as the message they preach. We need to search our own hearts lest similar selfish ambition lurks within us.

2. The Beauty of True Motives (1:15b, 17a)

Thankfully, it seems that many others were preaching the ‘truth’ (*aletheia*, v. 18) of Christ from motives of ‘good will’ (*eudokian*) and ‘love’ (*agape*). But for whom? Certainly for Paul. After all, this group of Christians had been encouraged in their witness by the apostle’s faithfulness. They hoped that their new-found courage would give him fresh encouragement.

In addition, however, the preaching of these faithful Christians would have been marked by goodwill and love towards their hearers. That was in marked contrast to Paul’s enemies who were driven by selfish ambition. They were simply using their hearers in order to promote themselves.

Jealousy, self-centeredness, the desire for position and influence still rear their ugly heads in the context of the Christian church. What lies behind our Christian service? Is it an expression of our love for Christ and for others? Or does it mask a driving determination for self-promotion? Do we have mixed motives? Or has Christ purified them?

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3. The Strength of Paul's Motives (1:17b-18a)

Paul is 'appointed for the defense of the gospel.' 'Appointed' or 'put here' (*keimai*) is a military term, emphasizing the point that in prison he is enduring hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. He is as much on duty as the guards posted to watch over him are on duty in the service of Rome.

Paul's response to these frustrating experiences is a model of grace and gives us an insight into the motives which determined his own ministry. He was able to 'rejoice' (*chairo*), despite the fact that people were trying to rub salt into his wounds. Paul refused to allow himself to be diverted from the main business of his ministry: exalting the name of his Lord Jesus Christ. Even if Christ was being 'preached' or 'proclaimed' (*katangelo*) from wrong motives, He was still being preached.

Perhaps Paul pondered upon the testimony of Joseph – another unjustly imprisoned man: 'But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good' (Gen. 50:20). We cannot always trace the hand of God, but we can always trust the heart of God.

This is often a great snare for Christians who are committed to the truth of the gospel. It is very easy to develop a streak of bitterness in our spirits when we see the errors of other professing Christians. We learn from Paul that recognizing false motives and even errors in others need not produce an un-Christlike temperament. So long as the one concern of our lives is to honor Christ, we will be safeguarded. Motives matter, but we must never allow the motives of others to devour us.

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Paul warns us against 'rivalry.' In what ways is that a danger today in Christian service? How would it manifest itself?*
- *How can we learn to have Paul's balance (rejoicing that Christ is preached despite false motives, vv. 15-18)?*
- *What are some of the causes of false motives in our own Christian service, and how can we deal with them?*
- *'We must reserve in our hearts a sanctuary of love for Jesus Christ — a sanctuary from which everything but trust in Him and love for Him is barred.' Discuss this idea.*

For next time: Read Philippians 1:18b-26 and Ferguson chapters 7-8.