

November 8, 2020

LIVING WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL
Philippians 1:27-30
(4 of 13 in a series through Philippians)

I'm going to admit something as I begin. Writing sermon introductions is hard. One reason is because you can go a thousand ways with them. Often I find myself wanting to grab the attention of the congregation and stress why what we're about to see in the text is important to us, maybe explaining along the way what I think the author of the Scripture text is doing in the section we're about to look at. One way you can try this is to just to summarize everything the sermon is going to be about and throw it in. This serves the purpose of alerting everyone to what's coming. It can create anticipation for what is about to follow. And it can create an order for the hearer so that he or she is able to prepare for the unfolding of each of these details in what is to come. However, the reason I typically try to avoid this is because it can get a bit complicated. Trying to take a brief introduction and throw in every issue you're about to unfold is just hard to do. But it's not impossible. In fact, I think that's precisely what we're looking at in our text this morning. Gordon Fee writes about Philippians 1:27-30 that they compose a "single, nearly impossible, sentence in Greek, which probably assumes this form because Paul tries to include all of the urgencies of the letter . . . in this opening word."¹ In other words, Paul opened this second section of his letter to the Philippians by writing one sentence that contained all the topics he wants to talk to them about in the rest of the letter.

Now the reason I refer to this as an introductory sentence although we've already covered most of the first chapter of this letter to the Philippians is because Paul transitions his letter at this point to a focus on what's going on and what needs to be done with the Philippians. You no doubt noticed that most of this first chapter focused on Paul himself. He told them how he'd been praying, what had transpired with him as he'd been imprisoned, and even pulled back the curtain a bit to show his hopes, desires, and motives in life. But beginning with our text this morning you can see an obvious shift in the letter. Paul turns his focus to his hearers. There are things he wants them to believe, do, and understand. And so you'll fewer descriptions of what's going on with Paul and more exhortations for the Philippians to obey. And he decides to introduce this second section of the letter with this verses—this one sentence in Greek—that we're looking at this morning, Philippians 1:27-30.

So if Paul writes these verses as an introduction to or summary of what is to come in the rest of the letter, how do we summarize Paul's summary statement itself? Well, I think I can do it in three statements. I'm no Paul. He may be able to do it in one sentence, but I need three statements to summarize what he's saying. And since he's directing it to the church at Philippi, I will summarize his statement by addressing it to us. So, let's start with the first of these. As a church, we need to live lives worthy of the gospel.

¹ Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, NICNT, 159.

As a church, we need to live lives worthy of the gospel

This is where Paul starts. He writes, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel” (v. 27a). In other words, everything that’s going to unfold in the rest of this letter we can put under the heading of “a manner of life worthy of the gospel.” But my guess is that our first response to this text is confusion. After all, if there are ideas that we’ve been trained never to put together it’s you and I being worthy of the gospel. And it’s good that this is our first instinct because the Bible teaches very clearly that we’re not worthy of what God has done for us in sending Jesus to live, die, and be raised for us so that by faith in him we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In fact, Paul is going to make this very clear in this book. In terms of our salvation, not only were we not worthy of what God did for us in sending Jesus, but we contribute nothing in terms of our righteous standing before God. Either we will stand one hundred percent in Christ’s righteousness on the day of judgment or we will not stand at all. That’s why we teach that we are not saved by good works but simply through faith in Christ’s finished work.

But Paul isn’t here suggesting that we’re worthy of the gospel or attempt to add to Christ’s righteousness so that we might be found worthy before God in judgment. Rather, Paul is telling us that as recipients of the undeserved grace that has been shown us in the gospel, we should live lives that seek to honor God and demonstrate what he’s done for us. And Paul doesn’t write this as some foreign idea. He writes to the Corinthians that he was unworthy ever to be an apostle and will acknowledge that it is only by the grace of God that he is what and who he is, but he notes, “And his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them” (1 Cor 15:10). For Paul, realizing that he deserved only death and hell in light of his rebellion against God and instead receiving grace and mercy, mandated that he live a life of obedience and honor before his Lord. This is what Paul means by living in a manner worthy of the gospel.

We see this idea portrayed in the classic novel *Les Misérables*, if you’re familiar with the story. A man, Jean Valjean, has just been released from a long time in prison for being a thief, when he’s finally released. And as he’s released, he’s full of anger and bitterness, and he plans on sleeping on the street. But instead, a bishop sees him and takes him into his home. However, Valjean simply goes back to his old ways, stealing and running off with the bishop’s silverware. Later, the authorities catch Valjean, march him up to the bishop’s home, and await to hear the bishop confirm that these are his stolen goods. But instead, he acts as if he’s given Valjean everything he’s stolen. In fact, he tells him that he also forgot to take some candlesticks as well. Everyone from the authorities to Valjean himself is surprised. He’s never been shown such grace. And the rest of the novel is filled with Valjean living a transformed righteous life—a life worthy of the grace he’s been shown, we might say. That is what Paul is saying here. There’s simply no way that individuals who have been the recipients of the grace of the gospel can live like we once did or like the world does now. As a church, we need to live lives worthy of the grace we’ve been shown in the gospel.

But, of course, this raises a question, doesn't it? What does this look like? And though we could spend all day and walking through all of Paul's epistles to see a full answer to this question, Paul focuses us on one aspect of this manner of living he has in mind, namely, that we must stand firm, united, and courageously on the gospel.

We must be unmovable, united, and courageous as we stand for the gospel

Paul writes, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents" (vv. 27b-28a).

Now, this might be surprising to us. It would be an interesting exercise to ask a group of believers—even believers who are familiar with Paul's other letters—what they might anticipate following Paul's exhortation to "let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel." We might think of those list of virtues Paul mentions in other places or a vice list to avoid. We might anticipate him saying, "Avoid sexual immorality, don't gossip or backbite, don't steal but work and give" and on and on. Instead, he tells them to be unmovable, united, and courageous as they stand for the gospel. But if we've paid attention to Paul's focus on the preciousness and glory of the gospel in chapter one, this makes sense. So, let's consider his words for a second.

He first throws in the phrase, "whether I come to see you or am absent," and this refers back to what Paul had just said in the previous section. After he contemplated whether this imprisonment would lead to life or death, he noted that he fully expected to be released from prison because this would be good for the church, and he noted that when that happened, he would come see them. However, even if that does take place, he doesn't want them to wait until then to act on what he's saying. Rather, he tells them that whether he's absent from them (as he is now) or is with them (as he hopes to be), he wants to hear that they're unmovable, united, and courageous and they stand for the gospel.

Now, the reason I use those terms—unmovable, united, and courageous—is to reflect what he goes on to describe. He says, "I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit." That is, he wants us to be a church that stands firm on the gospel. We should be unshaken. There are constant voices you are going to hear your whole life that say something like this, "If the church is ever going to reach the culture, then they need to change their message and get on board with the culture" at this point or that point. Maybe in our day we hear it in terms of the need to get away from the biblical roles of men and women in the church and home, or from acknowledging that the Bible condemns homosexual activity, or a host of other issues where the culture seems to be running away from (and not closer toward) us. But Paul says the opposite. He says, stand firm in one spirit.

Then he adds, "with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." It's not only necessary that we stand firm on the gospel but that we stand united. One of the things that the enemy tries to do to the church is pick off those individuals who distance themselves from the

rest of the church. He'll attempt to create division to separate the Lord's people from one another. Every Monday the pastors walk through the membership roll of the church, calling off each member name by name, just to see if there are any who are consistently absenting themselves from gathering together as the assemble each Sunday. And one reason why that is a focus for us is not only because the Bible commands us not to forsake assembling together but because we've seen the effects of individuals who divide themselves off from the body for one reason or another. It almost always has tragic, sinful effects in their lives. To use the imagery of the Bible, it's like a herd of animals being stalked by a lion. Together there is safety, but if you have ever seen one of these nature shows and watched one of those animals in the herd separate himself from the others, you know it doesn't end in a pretty sight. The enemy is seeking whom he may devour, and his tactic is to seek to find ways to sow division among the Lord's people.

And so Paul tells us that he wants us to stand firm on the gospel and stand united on the gospel. Look past all the elements the world might tell us should divide us or split us up into a number of sections and instead be a people who say, "We believe that the gospel is our only hope, it is enough, and we will believe and live in accordance with God's Word." We stand firm and united in that. But we also must stand courageously.

Paul adds, "and not frightened in anything by your opponents" (v. 28a). He's not acting like we won't have opponents. Of course we will. If they hated Jesus, we should not be surprised to find that the world hates the church as well. But Paul tells us that this isn't a time to shrink back from the gospel. Just as his hope is to stand before the Roman emperor and courageously testify to the gospel, even if it leads to his execution, so he expects us not to be frightened by our opponents but to keep declaring the gospel and the truths of God's Word.

Now, do you feel how timely this is? I've noted that we make a misstep if we try to abandon the gospel or divert from holding fast to God's Word in order to try to appease the culture or try to make Christianity more acceptable to them. I hope we all see the folly of that, and if we don't you can look at a bunch of empty church buildings and cathedrals throughout our cities and scattered across Europe that are a testimony that trying to alter the teaching of Scripture to make Christianity more palatable to the unbelieving world simply destroys the church. That's exactly what so many denominations and churches attempted to do throughout the 20th century, but if salt loses its saltiness, it is good for nothing.

But there is perhaps a more subtle way that we can make a misstep. It goes something like this. We can say, "Of course we're not going to abandon the Bible and distance ourselves from the teaching of the Bible in order to appease the unbelieving culture around us." But then we say, "But what crafty and clever things can we do to reach a culture that is far different from the culture that the Philippians might have known or even that we knew in the 1950s in America?" And we can be tempted to think that standing firm, united, and courageously on the gospel and the teaching of Scripture just might not be as sufficient to speak to the culture in our day as it was in Paul's. But that's simply not the case. Listen to how Paul ends verse 28. He writes, "This is a clear sign to them of their destruction but of your salvation, and that from God."

Now, let's stop here for a second and let this sink in. Paul says that as the world is attacking us as being antiquated in our views that men and women have specific roles in the home and church, or that homosexual activity is wrong, or that sexual activity should only take place between a man and a woman united in marriage, and on and on and on, and the church feels the pressure to be ashamed of our stance on this or perhaps say, "Well, we're not really saying this or that" in hopes that they'll find us acceptable or we'll be able to reach them, Paul tells us something so crazy that it'd be hard to believe if it weren't in the Bible. He tells us that we actually will speak most loudly to the unbelieving culture attacking us *by standing firm and unmovable, united, and courageous on the gospel and God's Word.*

Here's what he says. It's when the world sees that we won't be moved, that we're not adjusting our beliefs, and that we simply refuse to take our cues from anyone else but Jesus Christ in his Word that they're being shaken and affected. As we stand firm and united on the truth of Scripture, they're seeing that we really are the saved people of God and that they're not. They're being reminded that they're under the judgment of God and we are redeemed.

How does that work? Well, remember what the Bible says about unbelievers in Romans 1-2. Every time they look around at the created world, they are reminded clearly that the God of the Bible exists because he's put his imprint all over the world that he has made. He's made himself plainly known, and they know he exists. And they're having to work every minute of their lives suppressing what they know to be true as they walk in unbelief. Not only that, but God has written his laws on their hearts, so as they walk in rebellion against his Word, they know what they're doing is wrong. Paul even tells us that they know that "those who practice such things deserve to die" (Rom 1:32). Do you wonder then why they attack those who trust in, believe, and obey the Lord and his Word? They're trying to soothe their conscience that is telling them constantly, "You deserve to die for your rebellion against the God you know exists."

And if they can get God's people to be shaken and move over toward them, their consciences can be soothed, even if only momentarily. But if we stand firm, united, and courageous, we are a constant sign to them of their coming destruction and that we are those who are saved. Let us not sacrifice the church's witness but instead stand firm, united, and courageous on the gospel. And finally, let us realize that this will bring suffering, which is part of God's plan.

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The world will not react well to being reminded of their destruction and our salvation. They'll either bow the knee in faith to Christ or they'll persecute his people. But know that our suffering for standing firm on the gospel is also part of God's plan. Paul writes, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now heard that I still have" (v. 29).

Let's start at the end of that verse first. Paul reminds the Philippians of the conflict they witnessed that he had when he came to them. He was attacked, persecuted, and imprisoned.

The reason the Philippian jailer was converted is because Paul had been thrown in jail in Philippi. And they see that this conflict is continuing in Paul's life. He's writing this letter while being imprisoned in Rome.

But Paul wants them to see that his life isn't some exception. God called him to faith on that Damascus road and had Ananias tell him right out of the gate that he would suffer for the name of Christ. So too Paul tells us that it has been granted to us to believe. Remember how God opened Lydia's heart to believe as Paul got to Philippi? Well, that's a picture of all of us who believe. God has graciously opened our hearts to believe. It's a gift. But he's also granted us the privilege of suffering for the sake of Christ's name. So, when he tells us to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, standing firm, united, and courageously on God's Word, he's telling us to do this even though it will entail suffering. But don't worry because this is all part of God's plan to reach the world and glorify himself in it through his church.

We've been shown unfathomable grace if we know Jesus. Let us then live worthy of that. Keep standing firm and united on the gospel and God's Word. Stand courageously and unmoved against the world's attacks. And as we do, even amidst suffering, our standing will speak loudly to them of their need for Jesus. It's a challenging path, but it is the gift the Lord has given us as his people. So let us visibly demonstrate now that our answer to this call is "yes" as we come to the table this morning. Amen.