

Focusing on the Gospel and the Glory of Christ

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[0:00] And will you please stand with me as we read God's word together.

! Philippians chapter 1 verses 12 through 18. I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really! to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaimed Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? It's interesting how God works. He is sovereign. That we watched this clip, we're focusing on the persecuted church this morning. This is our scripture text as well. And I also was going to use John chapter 6 and Matthew chapter 14, where Jesus walks on water as a introduction for this morning's message. And it's just neat how God is putting all of that together. So when that happens, especially when that happens, it means we got to listen, because God has something for us to hear.

I was, in college, I was a mass media. That was my major. And so I did a lot with videography and photography. And if you've dealt with those before, you know that one of the things that you need to do at the very beginning, whenever you're going to about to record video or take pictures, is that you need to have a white balance. And what that is, is very, very basic. You take the camera, and you focus it on something white. A wall, a piece of paper. And what that does, is it teaches the camera to get in focus, and it teaches the camera what red really is. And this is, it sounds complicated, but really, it's telling, and it's getting the temperature for different colors. So that when you take your image, you see the red on film that you see in real life. If you've ever taken some camera, some pictures before, or videos, you've seen they're kind of tinted, maybe red or dark, because there wasn't a proper white balance, which helped things come into focus, so that you can see things in your image as they truly are. And I bring that up this morning, because Jesus, for us, operates like that white balance for photography and videography.

When we're focused on Christ, we are able to see things as they truly and really are. He helps us put things into perspective when we are focused on Him. And so in Matthew chapter 14 and John chapter 6, we see this demonstration of Jesus that He is, in fact, deity, that He is God. If you remember just moments before, He had fed 5,000. It may have been up to 15,000 when we include the women and children, He fed them with just a lunch, a couple loaves of bread and a few fish. And so He's done this amazing miracle. And then, if you remember, Jesus sends the crowds away, and He, in fact, sends His disciples also into a boat to cross over to the Sea of Galilee while He goes alone to pray. And so the disciples are in this boat, and they're caught in the middle of the sea, and they're caught in the middle of a storm, a severe storm. And it's about 3 to 6 o'clock in the morning, and all of this is taking place.

[4:13] And then they see an image in the distance, and they become terrified. Is this a ghost?

What is this thing coming to do? Is it going to make things even worse for us? And as the apparition comes closer, it speaks to them. And they hear a voice that's familiar, say, do not be afraid, it is I. And instinctively, they identify that voice as belonging to Jesus Christ. And so Jesus walks closer to them, and He's walked on water for about 3 to 4 miles, okay? So He is, in fact, God. And as He walks closer to the boat, as the rest of the disciples are astonished by what they are seeing and experiencing, Peter speaks up, and He boldly asks, Lord, it is you. If it is you, command me to come to you on the water. You remember what Jesus says to him? One word, come. And so Peter swings

his legs out over the side of the boat, and he steps down onto the water, which now has become like firm ground to him. And he rises to his feet, and he's walking on water as he's focused on Jesus. And then if you remember, the wind begins to pick up. In fact, the Bible says that Peter saw the wind. Now, we can't see wind, but we can see what it does to objects as it passes over and through them. So maybe the wind blew Peter's hair across his eyes, or maybe it blew his clothing across his face, or maybe it didn't blow, but he just was seeing what the wind was doing. And you remember what happened? He lost focus. He began to become afraid again, and then he began to sink into the water. And what's amazing is that Jesus, in an instant, in a blink of an eye, in a flash, grabs Peter out of the water, puts him in the boat, and they're over to the other side in just a moment.

And again, this story reveals to us the fact that Jesus Christ was, in fact, the Son of God, that he was, in fact, deity. But it also, I think, stresses the importance to us of keeping our focus on Jesus as we live our lives amidst the noise and the confusion of our fallen world.

[7:03] If you remember in Philippians verses 1 through 11, as we have covered that, Paul has given thanks to God for this church. He's expressed his love for them. He's let them know that he prays for them frequently.

And in these verses, we find a definition of what it means to live the good life. It's a definition that is different from what the world would say living the good life is all about. So for review, we've seen that living the good life means living for Christ instead of yourself. Living for Christ instead of yourself. And then last couple weeks, we've seen that living the good life is experienced by living in community with other believers. Living in community with other believers. In verses 12 through 26, now Paul gives the church a report on his present situation and his outlook for the future. The present report is the focus of our study this morning in verses 12 through 18 where we see a couple of things about living the good life. First, that living the good life means focusing on the gospel. And secondly, that living the good life means that you care more about Christ's glory than your own glory. Despite his present circumstances, again, he's in prison. Paul is for preaching the gospel. He's filled with joy.

How can he be so positive when it seems like so much has gone wrong for him? Well, it's simple. Paul's focus is on Christ. He is focused on Christ. Christ. The remarkable Christ-centered perspective of Paul's is on full display here in this text. He's not dejected over his circumstances. He isn't threatening to quit the faith or quit his ministry. He's not upset even that the critics are criticizing him and using his imprisonment as an opportunity for their own self-advancement. And not only that, he doesn't even seem to fear that his upcoming trial could result in him losing his life. He's not even afraid of that. He's focused on Christ. His focus is on who Christ is. On what Christ has already done for him. And he realizes in this time that all he needs is Jesus.

[9:52] That's all he needs. And as a result of that, he's filled with joy. And he's calling the Philippians to rejoice with him. He's able to rejoice because the gospel is going forth. Christ is being preached.

People are being saved. And so in Paul's Christ-centered mind, he's thinking, what more could I want than this? The gospel is advancing. Christ is being proclaimed. And I can rejoice despite the fact that I am in chains. You know, each week as I prepare the message, my prayer is that God would first convict me. And I can tell you here this morning that he has answered that prayer this week.

He has answered that prayer this week. And I pray that he will do the same for you. This is an important message because it is one of the most relevant passages on Scripture on how to maintain joy in ministry for those who serve as leaders in the church or teachers in the church, volunteers in the church. Paul shows us that the key to maintaining joy as we serve as pastors or as elders or as deacons or Sunday school teachers or Awana and youth group leaders or VBS instructors or nursery workers, you name it. He tells us that to maintain our joy, it's simple as we work for the Lord in these ways.

It's this. Keep your focus on Jesus Christ. Stay focused on Jesus. That's it. And that's all. Like Paul, when we make the gospel the focus of our lives and in the ministries that God has called us to serve in, we will find the joy we need to keep our focus on the Lord.

Is the gospel being preached? Then we rejoice. Is Jesus Lord? Do you know him as such? Then be joyful. Be thankful. Rejoice.

[12:07] Life is hard. And there are times when I'm ready for my life to be over. Amen? Not you wanting my life to be over, but you wanting your own life to be over. Amen? Glad nobody said amen, especially my wife. That would have been concerning. But you know what I'm saying? There are times when you're probably like me and you think, you know, Lord, if you would just come back right now, I would love it. I would rejoice for it. Because there are times in this world where we go through things that we just don't want to have to deal with anymore. But here Paul is dealing with critics. He's dealing with people who are envious of him. People who don't like him. And he is dealing with the pressure of being held captive in Rome. However, in this epistle to the Philippians, his eyes are focused on Jesus Christ.

Many times in a local church body like ours, we lack the joy that God has given us to experience. Because we are caught up in trying to measure up to someone else's church. Or we're trying to catch up to somebody else's ministry. And we are constantly comparing ourselves in our ministries with others.

And then that causes us to despair. To even become envious or even prideful. When we feel this way, we lose focus on Jesus and the church as a result suffers. And like Peter, it begins to drown. When we take our cue from Paul though, and we keep our focus on Christ and treasure his glory above all things, we will experience the good life individually and collectively as a community of believers. So let's see firstly that living the good life means focusing on the gospel.

From verses 12 through 14, again Paul says, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. So that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. So what does it mean to focus on the gospel? Well, we see that focusing on the gospel means putting the gospel first. Very basic.

Putting the gospel first. Paul here, instead of going on and on about what life is like in prison, he takes a different approach. He takes a divine perspective of the entire situation that he is involved with. On the surface, this looks like a very bad deal for Paul, doesn't it? It looks like a very bad deal for the church. This looks like a blow to Christianity. Here's our best missionary.

[15:13] This is our best evangelist and church planner, and he's locked up in prison. And so you'd be tempted to think, how could this be good for the church? But Paul reminds us that God is sovereign in everything.

And so he is able to see the big picture. He understands that his imprisonment is actually having a positive impact. It's making Christians bolder. And as a result of that, the gospel is advancing. It's going forward. And so his words highlight how he puts the gospel first, and thus maintains his joy. He puts the gospel first. And then also, focusing on the gospel, we see the benefit of that is that it helps us see the big picture. It helps us see the big picture.

Being focused on the gospel enabled Paul to see the bigger picture that God's mission was being accomplished through his imprisonment. And so he says, what has happened? He writes. And he starts by making a broad statement. Well, what is he talking about? This would include the riots that he has undergone, his two-year imprisonment in Caesarea as a result, and then ultimately his appeal to Caesar, the threats that were made on his life, a shipwreck on his way to Rome where he's at now, and his house arrest where he was having his freedoms restricted in his impending trial.

What has happened? All these things, he is saying, that have happened. All these bad things, all these sufferings have happened to advance the gospel. In the Greek, that word for advanced is used, it's a military term for blazing a trail for an army, right? Paul was preparing a way for the church, for the gospel to be advanced. And that was what was happening. Again, one of God's greatest ministers is locked up, and yet the gospel kept spreading. It kept advancing.

This news that we have, it can't be chained. It can't be bound. It can't be extinguished. Even when one of God's best is taken out of the game, so to speak, the gospel continues to advance.

[17:43] The Romans thought they could quiet Paul by locking him up, but what they ended up doing instead was giving him another audience, a captive audience. He had prisoners there, or he had guards, excuse me, and prisoners who he was able to teach the gospel to, and it was advancing there where he was at. It had become known throughout the whole imperial guard, he writes. So can't you see the providence of God here? Can't you see that God knows what he's doing? That he would allow one of his most powerful missionaries to be imprisoned? Why?

Because it was through Paul's imprisonment that the sovereign Lord was making the gospel known in Rome. God has a plan for our suffering.

I don't want to make it sound like suffering is easy, or that it's some kind of a cakewalk. We call it suffering for a reason, because when we're going through a time of suffering, we are suffering. In between Jack and Hazel, our two children, Danny and I had another child, and it did not live long. And that was a time of intense suffering for both of us. It broke our hearts. And I know I can say, and I can speak for my wife, that that is easily the worst day of our lives.

I've never experienced suffering like that before, and I haven't since. But the amazing thing about that is even though our hearts were broken and we were suffering, God gave us an opportunity through our child's life to minister to people in our church who had gone through the same kind of suffering before. People we had no idea that they had gone through something like this, and they came to us, and they let us know about children that they had lost before. And it gave us a new opportunity to be able to minister to them again for the brokenness that they may have felt, and for them to minister to us as they saw us suffering and hurting.

Here's the thing. God may be doing something that you don't understand, something that is very upsetting and painful for you to experience.

[20:24] God is using it somehow. There's always a greater purpose behind the suffering that we experience. And here's the other thing. When we focus on the gospel, it gives us the big picture.

And so I know while that was hard, because of the gospel, I understand that my separation from my child is not going to last forever. That one day, because of Jesus Christ, I will see it again.

And then forever. That is tremendously good news as we endure the sufferings that the Lord calls us to pass through.

So in the meantime, I have a responsibility to use my child's short life to glorify Jesus Christ. And that's what I'll do.

Expressing again the hope that I have, that I know that you have in Jesus Christ. The joy that comes from knowing that we live for and serve a sovereign God.

[21:38] Romans 8, 28 is a verse that is close to my heart. It's so true. We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.

For those who are called according to His purpose. So if you are a follower in Jesus Christ, you've got to understand that since that moment, your peaks and your valleys, however you perceive them to be, your good times and your times of suffering, that God is using all of those things to make you more like His Son, Jesus.

I love this quote by Timothy Keller. In fact, I've got it in my study Bible. I've got it written over this passage in the margin. He says, Suffering can refine us rather than destroy us because God Himself walks with us in the fire.

Let me read that again. Suffering can refine us rather than destroy us because God Himself walks with us through the fire.

Is that not encouraging? And it's the truth. The gospel helps us to see the big picture when we're focused on it. It is no accident that God has you at today where you are right now.

[23:00] And you are there for a reason. And the circumstances that you are experiencing are God-ordained opportunities for you to advance the gospel.

Focusing on the gospel results with it being heard. When we're focused on the gospel, it will be heard. In verse 13, It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Again, Paul has a captive audience here. The gospel was spreading, he said, through the whole imperial guard, which could have been around 9,000 soldiers who this message, this imprisonment, is spreading through.

They're hearing about Paul and they're hearing about why he's in prison and they are hearing the gospel as a result. So instead of stewing in his cell or whining or complaining about his situation, Paul saw an opportunity to reach lost people.

These battle-hardened soldiers. Now you guys know I came from Leavenworth. We've got a federal pen, we've got a military prison, and in the town over we've got a state prison.

[24:12] And there's other prisons for women in the area as well. And so over my time there, I've got to meet and minister to many prison guards. And I can tell you that they are hardened to the prisoners that they encounter every day.

I couldn't tell you some of the stories that I've heard, but it is a very difficult living. And so you've got to understand that these guards were probably enduring the same thing, and yet here was Paul, a blessing to them.

Right? And he's sharing this good news with them. You imagine, no wonder this word is spreading. You hear about this prisoner? You hear about why he's here? You hear about this good news? Could it be?

The gospel was advancing because of Paul's suffering. People were having the opportunity to hear it. So how do we do this? How does this apply with us? Well, at your place of work, for example, you have fellow employees, coworkers, bosses, etc., customers, who as you're interacting with, you might come to find out that they're suffering in some way or they're going through some kind of a hardship.

It may be a big thing, a great thing. It may be a really small thing. But you know what you can do? You offer to pray for them. And I have never, and now I work in the church, but you know I've worked other places in my past, but I've never been told by somebody that they could not, they would not let me pray for them.

[25:41] People want to be prayed for. They do. So here's the thing. Offer to pray for them. And here's the other thing. Pray for them right then and right there.

Do it. You don't have to have a long-winded, great prayer flowered with all kinds of fancy language. Be short and simple. God knows what's going on.

It'll mean so much to them. And it will advance the gospel. And there are other things such as that. You don't have to be at work. You can be just in your neighborhood, in your community, wherever the place may be.

When the Holy Spirit prompts you to act like Christ for somebody else, do it. And don't ask questions. Focusing on the gospel results with people being emboldened to speak it.

So it's enabled to be heard. And now when we're focused on the gospel, it emboldens people to speak it. Verse 14. Paul says, And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

[26:48] So Paul is saying that when others heard about his brave witness in the Roman prison, they themselves were inspired by him to do the same.

It increased their faith. Persecuted Christians, as we've prayed for this morning, and as we saw the clip of Richard Wurmbrand, they have a way of being used by God to inspire timid believers, don't they?

By what they are doing as a result of their advancing the gospel. And there is nothing that spreads the gospel more than when the church is being persecuted.

Many of you have probably heard the name of Jim Elliott. Jim Elliott was a missionary, and if you remember the story, he and four of his friends while on the mission field were brutally killed by the Aka Indians.

And a high number of Wheaton College graduates, soon after hearing this news, offered themselves as missionaries in the years that followed. And so during his life, Jim Elliott longed for more people to become missionaries, but it wasn't until he died that his prayer was truly answered.

[28:07] And people were inspired by the life he gave to go back to those people, to eventually win them for Christ, and to continue to go into these places, even though they know that it might cost them their life.

This is what staying focused on the gospel looks like. And this is what it results with. Many of you know this quote by Jim Elliott, and it's a great one. He said, He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

And I love this other quote that's not as well known from Jim Elliott. He says, Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation believing to be the will of God.

Secondly, we see that living the good life means loving Christ's glory more than your own. This comes from verses 15 through 18. So now here Paul is shifting his focus, and he's talking about two different motives from two different groups within the Christian community that he is encountering. One group whose ministry was motivated by envy and strife, and another group whose ministry was being motivated by love and goodwill. So we had one group who viewed Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to tear him down, and to elevate themselves as a result, to advance their own ministries.

[29:39] And then we had another group who cared about what Paul was going through. They understood why he was in prison, that it was for God's will, and so they were continuing to advance the gospel, as we've seen, being emboldened by that.

But what's interesting about all of this is that Paul doesn't mention anything about the group with bad motives being outside of the kingdom of God. He counts them as brothers and sisters in Christ. So we must keep in mind also that we ourselves can fall into the same sin that they once did, and be aware of that so that we don't. To love Christ's glory more than your own, you must check your motives.

And so then again, Paul says some preach Christ from envy and rivalry. And so we've got to be aware, as Christians in the church, of being jealous and envious in the church.

So let's be real, and let's confess that there are many times, as a church, we rejoice when we see God doing great things through a church or a ministry a few towns away, far away.

[30:58] But when God is doing the same things through a church down the street, in our own community, let's be real, and let's be honest, we aren't as joyful, are we?

Instead, we start to think, well, why are people going there and not coming here? You know, don't they understand those people and the history and all the things that have gone on there?

And if they really knew what was going on, well then, they'd be here instead. Or maybe we blame it on, well, they have all the fancy stuff. You know, if we could answer the same fancy things that they do, then of course they'd be here and not there.

We do this, don't we? This motivation isn't just expressed from one church to another, but it's also expressed within ministries inside the church.

Why, if you're a Sunday school teacher, why isn't my class growing like this other adult Sunday school class, right? Or how come I don't have as many kids in my Iwana group as in that kid?

[32:05] Or they seem to be learning their verses quicker than my kids. Well, that's not right. That's not fair. And we become envious of one another. In fact, I know of a church that had for years been used to just having one adult Sunday school class.

And the church began to grow, experience some growth, and there was a need for a second adult Sunday school class. And as a result of that, more adults, more people, were coming to Sunday school.

But that class that had been there from the beginning was uncomfortable with it because they lost some of their adults to the other class. And that upset them, but they didn't see the bigger picture. More people are coming to church. More people are coming to Sunday school. Let's rejoice in that together. You know, Satan cannot take away our salvation, but he will seek to turn us on one another.

He'll seek to cause us to think that the other church is our competition. And he'll seek to put us into competition with other churches.

[33:14] And when this is allowed to happen, we must start, we start to view, excuse me, other churches, other Christians, even within our own church, we start to see them as the enemy.

Can you imagine? So we must be adamant and fervent when we start to feel this way, to put an end to it immediately. We aren't in competition with one another here.

We're partners. We're not in competition with other like-minded churches, right, who believe the core truths about Christianity that we believe. We're partners.

We're working together. And so we should rejoice when we see another ministry experiencing growth as a result of their commitment to the Bible, to God's Word, and to being the type of church that God has called us to be.

Don't constantly compare yourself with others or others' ministries. Rejoice instead. We've also got to be aware of temptation for self-promotion in ministry.

[34:24] This other group, these other ministers that Paul is talking about, they wanted to be recognized by everybody else, and so they viewed Paul as a rival. They viewed Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to advance themselves, to be promoted.

We can't think that way. And you know what? In fact, there may become a time when you're the one who is envied, when it's you who everybody else is looking at with jealous eyes and envious hearts. And so how should you respond? Well, you do what Paul did. He doesn't try to defend himself. He doesn't allow their rivalry with him to preoccupy his thoughts.

He knows that God will ultimately judge their hearts and their ministries. And so he's not concerned with that. He simply stays focused on the gospel and the task that God has given him to proclaim Christ.

He puts the gospel first. To love God's glory more than your own, you must rejoice when Christ is proclaimed.

[35:33] Verse 18, What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth. Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. So despite the motivations of these groups, despite what was being said about him, Paul was rejoicing because Christ, as a result of all of this, was being proclaimed and what more could he want?

There will be preachers, there will be teachers, there will be churches who do things that make us cringe. And we will be tempted when they do to vilify them.

Again, to treat them as the competition or to belittle them. In fact, I know of a church and a pastor who was going to begin a series of sermons on tithing. And so, he began the series of sermons with an introduction where he came from the back of the sanctuary up behind the pulpit riding a tricycle. And he got off of the tricycle and he stepped behind the pulpit and he said, tithing, it's as easy as riding a tricycle. Okay? That would make me cringe because could you imagine Adrian Rogers or John MacArthur riding a tricycle in church or even outside of church?

You know, those are the types of things that maybe make us cringe. But it shouldn't give us ammunition to start shooting holes through another church and another ministry and another teacher and another preacher.

[37:00] It's silly, not necessary. If it ever comes to the point where we got to do that here, we're in trouble. Amen? But you know what I'm saying? There are things that people in the church, other churches will do that cause us to cringe, but we've got to understand that they are not our rivals, they are not our competition, they are not our enemies.

Paul understood this. And so we must understand in order to fully experience the good life that Christ has made available to us that in all things, Jesus is better.

In all things, Jesus is better. Jesus is better than your comfort. Jesus is better than your circumstances.

Jesus is better than a high-profile position. What Jesus says about you is what truly matters, more so than what any other person thinks or believes about you.

And if you are a child of God, you know what Jesus thinks of you? He loves you. And He looks at you with delight. And you make Him happy.

[38:12] Can you imagine that? The Lord loves you. So let us care more about Jesus' glory than our own glory. And let's focus on Jesus in the gospel and making sure that we put that first in all matters of our life.

And I think John the Baptist summed it up best. And that's how I'm going to close this message this morning. If you remember, Jesus had come on the scene. John had baptized Him.

He had testified that in fact this is the Lamb of God who is coming to take away the sins of the world. And so Jesus began His ministry. And if you remember that Jesus began baptizing more people than John the Baptist was baptizing.

And John the Baptist disciples came to Him, right? They're concerned. Hey, Jesus' church is baptizing more people than our church. They didn't say that but you know what I mean.

They're baptizing more people than we are. We're being put out of business here. And so what does John say? He must increase and I must decrease.

[39:24] increase. And so it must be with you and I all the days of our life until we go to be with the Lord. He is always increasing. We are always decreasing as we are seeking to live Christ-centered and not self-centered lives.

Thank you.