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Preaching Through Philippians: How to Advance the Gospel in the Worst of Times

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Preaching Through Philippians: How to Advance the Gospel in the Worst of Times

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Bible, Missions, & Ministry

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

by

Amanda Rigby

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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ABSTRACT

The Christian church has been influenced by the institution of preaching since its inception in the first century. Preaching has developed over time into the practice encountered most often today: sermons addressed and preached to congregations of Christians of all different denominations and geographical locations. Contemporary preaching has the power to shape the church in the emerging postmodern era. As someone studying to become a pastor who preaches to a church, I realize the importance as well as the significance of the task I have chosen to undertake. I use this space to enter into the practice of sermon preparation and writing. I undertake a brief history of preaching, common methodologies of preaching, my own methodology of preaching, and a brief background to the text of the Letter to the Philippians. Philippians is written to a group of suffering Christians, which contains much in the way of application in today's world. Then, based on my introduction and analysis of the text, I write three sermons based on the text of Philippians, utilizing exegesis and narrative preaching. The intention of the paper is to engage the tradition and practice of preaching and prepare me for a long career of sermon writing and preaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Brief History of Preaching

Preaching is a very established practice, transformed over many centuries by the influence of faithful, bold and capable men and women. Although not unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition, preaching has become a cornerstone of spiritual formation in the Christian church over the past two-thousand years.¹ Since the formation of the church in the exciting years after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians have met together to engage in fellowship, worship and edification through the teaching of the Word of God. As members of the Church in the modern day who have benefited from the tradition laid out by many who have gone before, disciples of Jesus cannot enter into the practice of preaching God's Word without consideration of the gravity of their task.

In the early days of preaching, sermons were simple. Although there is not much to be found in the Bible that resembles modern day sermons, one could easily argue that "everything in the New Testament is preaching".² Although the nature of the ministry of Jesus Christ meant he often communicated good news to large crowds, many scholars believe that the gospels do not represent the exact words of Jesus.³ The same could be said for Paul and other New Testament figures who are traditionally considered to be the first Christian preachers. Although New Testament scholars doubt the likelihood that the words of Jesus, Paul, and Peter were spoken exactly as we read them, the Christian

¹ Edwards Jr., O. C., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ i.e. the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7).

tradition associates the canonical gospels and the book of Acts in particular with early sermons.⁴ For example, one of Jesus's earliest sermons in any of the gospels occurs in the synagogue at Nazareth, where he reads the scroll of Isaiah and tells the crowd they are witnessing the fulfillment of the prophecy. Within the sermon, Jesus includes a liturgical, an exegetical and a prophetic element. His method works to bridge the gap between traditional Jewish preaching and his own kind of preaching, as well as to set a new precedent, "which creates a deep continuity in the history of the biblical revelation by this use of both the old and the new word."⁵

One of the more popular examples of preaching in the New Testament is in the book of Acts. Paul speaks to the Jewish people gathered in the synagogue of Antioch on the Sabbath, proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ to them. He connects the history of Israel with details about the resurrection of Jesus. His sermon concludes as he tells them, "Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39 NRSV). People began following Paul in crowds, demanding to know more about this Jesus he had preached to them. Needless to say, even the earliest and simplest preaching was an effective means of communicating the gospel.

Many other theologians, philosophers, professors, teachers and scholars have since ventured onto the stage of preaching. Greek preaching began to transform with Origen in the late second and third centuries, where it was "through him that exegesis and

⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

⁵ Brilioth, Yngve, *A Brief History of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 8.

preaching were so firmly united”.⁶ The talented and well-known rhetorician John Chrysostom in the third century was easily the most prolific and exegetically sound early preacher. From Augustine to Wyclif to Luther to Wesley to Edwards, preaching has transformed from a prophetic proclamation to a meticulous, processed mixture between art and science.⁷

A modern-day sermon has come to be understood as “a speech delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it”.⁸ There is much to consider in taking on the task of preaching. This definition demands that the preacher consider doctrine, the biblical text, and relevance to those who will hear the sermon. In addition to concerns about content, the preacher must also keep in mind rhetoric, grammar and syntax – language – in order to effectively communicate to a crowd or congregation.

These facets of developing and preaching a sermon should become something of a second nature for a preacher. Although inspiration for a sermon might occur in a moment, preparation for preaching almost always takes the careful and arduously devoted time of the preacher. Many hours of sermon preparation should be the standard for preachers, considering the immense weight of the task of preaching put upon the shoulders of those

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching*, 832.

⁸ Edwards Jr., O. C., *Elements of Homiletic: A Method for Preparing to Preach* (New York: Pueblo, 1982), 7.

who are called to preach. Preaching the Word of God requires readiness on the part of the preacher to dedicate much time and energy in order for the finished product to be one that reminds its audience of the ultimate goal: “that at the name Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:11 NRSV).

Methodology of Preaching

The tradition of preaching, developed by thousands of people over thousands of years, demands preparation and forethought on the part of the preacher. Context should always be a concern in the forefront of a preacher's mind when he or she prepares a sermon. In a sense, "a sermon is the work of the church, not just a work of the preacher."⁹ Preaching is not an entirely singular action; the audience who hears and listens participates in the sermon as well. The intended audience (a congregation, the church) should shape the content of every sermon as well as influence the preacher's decision about which biblical text(s) to utilize in a sermon.

As views of absolute truth, especially in the West, have shifted, the practice of preaching has also necessarily shifted in order to remain relevant.¹⁰ When considering the intended audience, a preacher must understand that most church-goers subscribe to postmodern ideas about truth whether they realize it or not.¹¹ It is no longer enough for preachers to exegete the text and come a conclusion about the truth of what it says and what it means. Effective preaching must also accommodate the postmodern worldview of the audience. There are many ideas about the most effective ways to preach to a postmodern audience, including dialogical preaching, inductive rather than deductive preaching, and storytelling within preaching.¹²

⁹ Long, Thomas G., *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 226.

¹⁰ Graham Johnston asks, "What will powerful preaching sound like as this twenty-first century continues to unfold?" in *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), 8.

¹¹ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 149-172.

The idea of narrative preaching has been particularly influential on my own preaching style. Although it is not a new idea (preachers have been preaching through stories for a very long time), narrative preaching does fit well in the emerging postmodern era.¹³ This way of preaching embraces the ability of humanity to connect with and learn from stories. It is expressed in several different ways: preaching through a story, preaching alongside a story, preaching the story of scripture, etc.¹⁴ As the ideology of the Western world shifts from modern to postmodern, narrative preaching is an effective way to address from the pulpit the new ideas and values of postmodern people. As absolute truth becomes a more obsolete idea, narrative preaching has the potential “to recover the story that gave rise to the doctrine,” and it gives the preacher the ability to “give the doctrine a face.”¹⁵ I seek to utilize the power of narrative preaching as I continue to develop my own style.

¹³ Ronald J. Allen et al., *What’s the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008). 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

Personal Methodology

There are likely as many methods for sermon preparation as there are preachers. My experience has led me to discover my own admittedly imperfect method for developing and preaching sermons. I have discovered that preaching through storytelling is highly effective. In a world where people struggle to perceive absolute truth, our only option is to find truth in each other. The best way to communicate that sort of relative, relation truth in preaching is to engage the audience on a more personal level. There are a variety of ways to effectively invite the audience into that sort of interaction; however, storytelling is the easiest to develop and the most accessible to the audience.

After I've selected a text, I usually spend quite a while in prayer. I ask God for focus, wisdom, and the ability to be spoken through. I read the text several times over and, if time permits, then I take a few days away from reading it. Over the course of those several days, I mull the text over. I wrestle with it and search for what it means in the time when it was written, in my own life and in the lives of those I will address. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I see this text come alive in my own life; in that short time, I might receive inspiration from something that is said to me, or from watching or experiencing different interactions and situations. More often than not, though, I have to take the time to grapple with the words and their meaning.

At this point in the process, I read before and behind the chosen text, and I consider the context of the writer and the audience, and then my own context and that of my audience. I consult a few commentaries, as well. I sometimes ask the opinion of people I know (a pastor, professor, etc.) about what he or she thinks the text says. I compare my reading with the reading of others to ensure I am faithful to the text. At this

point, I usually feel ready to begin determining focus and function statements through a preaching method developed by Thomas Long. He believes the best way to develop a sermon is to decide “what the sermon aims to say”, which is a focus statement. Then, he says, comes the function statement, that determines “what the sermon aims to do.”¹⁶

Once I feel confident in my focus and function statements, I move to write the sermon, returning to those statements often for guidance. After I complete the writing process, I send a draft to several people (friends or family) for revision, approval and to ensure there isn't any blatant heresy present in the sermon. As soon as my sermon is grammatically, syntactically, and most importantly theologically affirmed by two or three people, I begin to practice. My practice usually consists of reading through the written manuscript as many times as it takes for me to feel comfortable with the flow and the message. This number ranges from 10 to 20 repetitions. In the midst of these repetitions, I revise the manuscript according to my delivery. Often, I will discover better ways to communicate a certain idea, or better wording for important phrases or sentences. The last couple of practices are spent off script, trying to accomplish a more natural sound than the sometimes stiff one that comes from practicing a manuscript. I return to prayer, usually requesting boldness to speak what I have developed. Counting all the time I spend considering, writing, revising, and practicing, each sermon takes me about 20-25 hours to prepare before it is ready to be preached to an audience.

¹⁶ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 108.

The Letter to the Philippians

The Letter to the Philippians is a powerful text full of encouragement and love. Although by modern standards Philippians would be considered a lengthy letter, it is one of the shorter epistles of Paul in the New Testament.¹⁷ Despite the length of the letter, there is much theological substance to be found within its few pages. Paul writes to the Philippians from prison in Rome, where he is unsure about his ultimate fate. However, his purpose in writing lies not with his own predicament but with the ultimate advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ His lack of concern with his own grim situation brings even more power to his words of affirmation and instruction. His intention in writing is to strengthen the developing church and the continuing work of evangelism by the Philippian disciples.

Paul's authorship of Philippians remains unquestioned by most scholars.¹⁹ Although concerns about the potential different authorship of the Christ hymn found in 2:6-11 have led some to call into question whether the entirety of Philippians is actually Pauline, many scholars still support the inclusion of the Christ hymn as composed by Paul himself, like the rest of the letter.²⁰ As one of few undisputed letters of Paul, Philippians contains valuable information about his life and the life of the early church, as well as his Christology and theology which became invaluable in the formation of

¹⁷ Flemming, Dean E., *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill, 2009), 21.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Fee, Gordon D., *Paul's Letters to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 46.

church doctrine. Paul's unique status as one of few apostles leaves him with great authority to instruct the church throughout the world.

Soon after introducing himself as the author of the letter and giving thanks for the Philippians, he reveals that he is "in chains" in 1:7, which likely means he is in a Roman prison. It is probable that Paul is referencing his imprisonment in Rome in the 60's AD, although others argue that his imprisonment was in Caesarea or Ephesus.²¹ Regardless of where he was in prison, though, his status as a prisoner means Paul was making waves in the Roman empire. His imprisonment and the persecution of the Philippians that precipitated the writing of the letter reveal the controversy the gospel sparked in the first century. Paul is sure to mention, though, that his imprisonment has been highly beneficial; as a prisoner he has managed to "spread the gospel", which is his main concern, especially in the letter to the Philippians (Phil 1:12-13 NRSV).

Philippi was a small city in the province of Macedonia. Paul writes to the church that was founded in Philippi in the 50s AD, likely by Paul himself. It is estimated that he writes to them in the late 50s or early 60s, after being imprisoned in Rome and receiving money from the Philippians via Epaphroditus, who he mentions in his thanksgiving.²² Philippi, as a Roman city, was largely dominated by paganism. The persecution received by the Philippian disciples was most likely a result of the pervasive Roman paganism within their city.²³ Despite their persecution, Paul seems to think the Philippians are doing rather well based on his encouraging thanksgiving for them in the beginning of his

²¹ Ibid., 34.

²² Silva, Moises, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 1-2.

²³ Bockmuehl, Markus, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Hendrickson, 1998), 6.

letter. The text makes it clear that the Philippian disciples have “partnered with Paul in the ministry and advance of the gospel” and even become “Paul’s ‘partners in grace.’”²⁴

The overarching theme is the continuing advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the Philippian church despite the suffering those Philippian disciples are experiencing. This theme is strongly supported by several Christological statements, Paul’s own example and the idea that Christians should always rejoice in every circumstance, as well as other motifs found throughout the epistles of Paul.²⁵ He reminds the Philippians that they are responsible for standing firm in their faith despite their situation; however, he also manages to emphasize the reality of their complete dependence upon the grace of God. The dichotomy of these “twin truths of human responsibility and divine sovereignty” is felt and seen often in the letter to the Philippians.²⁶

Although *Philippians* was written to one church in a small city in a province across the world nearly 2,000 years ago, Paul’s words still hold the power and relevance to speak directly into the lives of Christians around the world today. Despite the almost two millennia of culture, language, and history standing between modern readers and those Paul had in mind, his words apply to the current reality of oppressed and suffering disciples of Jesus Christ. The model and person of Christ, who stands “front and center” in the letter to the Philippians, provides a powerful, transcendent testimony of encouragement and instruction to all who desire to follow in the way of the cross.²⁷

²⁴ Flemming, *Philippians*, 10.

²⁵ Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 41.

²⁶ Silva, *Philippians*, 22.

²⁷ Flemming, *Philippians*, 39.

Today's church still remains in great need of conviction and hope as prescribed by Paul in his letter to the Philippians.

SERMONS

Philippians 2:1-11

Have you ever been in a truly terrible situation? I don't mean getting a speeding ticket, or even losing a job. I'm thinking more along the lines of if there is a warrant out for your arrest, or if you are trying to escape certain death. If you've been in a situation like this, you know exactly what I mean when I tell you there is little that can be said to make the situation any better. Trite encouragements mean nothing when waiting for the judgment of an irreversible sentence or living in hiding for fear of being captured and killed.

Luckily, I haven't experienced a situation like that in my lifetime. I haven't yet been on the wrong side of the law, and I've never had to hide, afraid for my life. I've never resisted the rule of a tyrant, or been on the receiving end of a gun. As a middle class, white, American, I have rarely — if ever — faced true persecution. I've never needed to run away from law enforcement. I've never gone without food for days at a time. I've never literally run for my life. The vast majority of my life has been quiet, safe, and undisturbed.

As we all know, though, there are many people around the world for whom that is not true. There are many men, women and children right now facing starvation, deadly disease, severe poverty, oppression and tyranny of the worst kind. There are many who are living in hiding, afraid to be caught by an authority who will kill them based on race, economic status, or religion. There are many who rightly live in fear of the same systems that have protected those of us in this room: law enforcement, the military, government systems. All we have to do is sit on our comfortable couches and turn on the television in

the living rooms of our air conditioned houses and we can watch, from a safe distance, atrocities most of us in this room can hardly imagine.

Right now, I want you take a few seconds to picture the faces of people you have seen in these situations. Think of the faces of impoverished orphans, wracked with illness and hunger. Remember the fearful faces of faithful Jews, hiding in their own homes from deadly Nazi soldiers. Imagine the face of the modern day Christian, sentenced to death and immediately killed for having faith. It is disturbingly easy for us to imagine these faces because we hear about very real people in these very real situations all the time.

Now, I want you to imagine you were tasked with encouraging those people. With their suffering faces in your mind, try to think of something, anything you could say to alleviate their pain or fear. Picture yourself speaking words of inspiration and hope to people who have no reason to feel inspired or hopeful. If you're anything like me, you will end up feeling incompetent. You will be at a true loss for words. You will cringe at the first thoughts that come into your mind, realizing they are useless. You will realize that this is an impossible task.

This was the very task that Paul faced when he wrote to the Philippians. They were probably not starving, or being slaughtered in vast numbers, but the disciples in the city of Philippi were facing very real persecution that few if any of us could actually imagine. Living in a polytheistic culture, their strict belief in the one, true God would have immediately singled them out from the people they lived with. Their refusal to make offerings to other gods, or to participate in pagan rituals would have made them dangerous in the eyes of the Roman government. The Philippian Christians would have been outcasts among those they used to call friends or family. They also could have been

targets for torture among Roman officials if they refused to renounce their faith. Needless to say, the Philippian disciples would have lived in a kind of fear you and I have probably never experienced before.

When Paul writes to these dejected and oppressed Christians, he knows he must say something to encourage them. He knows they are experiencing torment like they never would have predicted when they first decided to commit themselves to Christ. He opens his letter with a thanksgiving unlike any other he had written. He reminds them of his constant prayer for them, and his confidence of Christ's work in them. He even says he wishes he could be with them, knowing what they are enduring. Paul also tells them of his own struggles. He has been imprisoned in Rome, and yet even there he has found joy. He hopes his joy in suffering, even from a distance, can be encouraging to his friends in Philippi as well.

You and I would probably struggle immensely had we been in Paul's shoes. Even from a prison cell, it would be so difficult to speak words of hope into what seemed like a hopeless situation. But I think Paul is much smarter than he is often given credit for. While we sit here, so far removed from their struggles, trying to think of what we could possibly say, Paul sits in chains, knowing the only thing he could say that could possibly be of value.

In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul writes this to the Philippian disciples: "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your

own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:1-11 NRSV).

In the midst of chaos and pain, despite fear of punishment, torture and even death, Paul finds the only words that would have made a difference to these suffering disciples of Jesus. Although their friends and family have alienated them, and their society has marginalized them, and there is little hope that those situations will change, Paul manages to speak the only words they needed to hear. The only way for Paul to accomplish this impossible task of encouraging those who are suffering beyond comprehension is to mention Jesus Christ.

Of course that is the only way to encourage the Philippians! Paul is writing to people who have actually given up everything to follow in the footsteps of Christ. The cross they have taken up to follow him looks like losing family members after conversion, losing their source of income, losing their culture and identity, losing their safety and maybe even losing their lives. What better way to encourage the Philippians than to remind them of the person for whom they gave up everything and decided to become part of a small, oppressed body of outcasts.

Paul tells them that the way to survive in times like these is to have the same mind as Christ does. And we think, okay Paul, we'll get right on that. Let me just focus really hard and then my mind will be like that of the Son of God. Paul doesn't leave it there, though. He tells them *how* they can be of the same mind, having the same love. They should not be in rivalry with one another, or be conceited. They should be truly humble and put the needs of others before themselves. And most of all, they should follow in the way of the cross.

There's a really unique phrase here that Paul uses to describe Jesus. He says that Jesus emptied himself. This is the idea of complete and total sacrifice, the total pouring out of an offering on the altar. This is the idea of a man who was also divine and who had all the power in the world to save himself but chose instead to let himself be killed publicly in the worst way imaginable. This is the same mind and the same love that Paul is calling disciples of Jesus Christ to live out. We are to be a self-emptying people in the same way that Christ was.

He reminds the Philippians that Jesus, the one who was equal with God, became a human being. He went from exalted status alongside the God of the universe to become a dirty, screaming infant. He subjected himself to illness, temptation, heartache and the worst of what we experience as human beings. Not only did he become human, but he resisted the temptation that all of us fall into on a daily basis. And then, he was fully obedient, allowing himself to be killed through a death of the worst, most humiliating kind.

There is some small, resistant part of me that thinks this is perhaps one of the worst forms of encouragement ever. Paul essentially tells the Philippian disciples to take

heart because the way to survive is to be exactly like the perfectly humble and obedient Son of God. “Well, great,” I can imagine them thinking. “More bad news.” But that small resistant part of me is one that hasn’t been alienated for my faith. That part of me is one that can’t imagine the isolation, the pain, and the torture that some of Paul’s friends in Philippi had experienced. The point Paul is trying to make is not that the expectation for the Philippians is perfection. On the contrary, he is reminding them of the perfect Savior who gave up everything for them, just as they are giving up safety and comfort for him. They are pointed to the eschatological truth that one day, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, even those knees and tongues which right now are persecuting the Philippians. All of it will be to the glory of God the Father, who has called them out of a life of sin and depravity and into one of true hope.

In this country, safe and comfortable, there is some part of us that resists the message of Paul. Why do we need to be humble? Why do we need to take up our cross? What would our cross even be, anyway? But on behalf of those around the world who need the encouragement of Paul, who need to know that there is a perfect Son of God who has walked the road of ultimate suffering for their salvation, I hope and pray that we can begin to accept this encouragement. It is indeed very challenging for most of us to put ourselves in the Philippian Christians’ shoes. Most of us will not experience physical torture because of our faith. Most of us, even if our family isn’t Christian, will not be alienated and despised for our faith. However, that’s not to discount our own sufferings; of course, the modern Western World comes with its own set of problems that the Philippians could never have dreamed up. We can look around our own lives and see a

totally different kind of suffering. If we look, we see broken families, ravaged by divorce, addiction, or abuse. We see social and cultural outcasts, told from their childhood being different is wrong. We see racism, sexism and homophobia tearing the unity of our nation to pieces. There is plenty of suffering to be seen if we only look for it.

That is actually our calling. We are called to be a people with eyes capable of seeing the suffering that surrounds us. Then, we are called to be a people with hands and feet capable of acting to alleviate that suffering. Far too often, the church stands at the line in the sand, holding stones upon which are written all kinds of sins, ready at any moment to fling them at the broken people on the other side. Meanwhile, we have a perfect Savior who has mercy and shows great grace for both the sinners and the hypocrites who condemn them. Then, this perfect Savior empties himself, crosses that line, and stands in the place of those we would condemn. It is those times when we are ready to cast those stones that we need our perfect Savior the most. Jesus calls us to realize that we too deserve to be pelted with rocks, and then he calls to put the stones down and instead live with the same mind and the same love he does. He calls us to pick up our own crosses alongside those we would rather condemn, and then follow in his footsteps to the glory of his name.

May we never be a people who ignore the reality of suffering around us. May we ourselves, like Paul, become the authors of encouragement to a broken world that desperately needs to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:2-14

Have you ever met someone who was impossible to dislike? If you have, you know that a person like that somehow manages to endear him or herself to other people. Most of you probably know exactly the kind of people I am talking about. These are people who are so likeable that it's impossible to feel anything but affection or even admiration for them. Because they are so likeable, they can get away with anything. It seems like that description is perfect for the Apostle Paul. He had such a charismatic personality that I imagine it was difficult find quarrel with him. For example, at the beginning of the letter to the Romans, he writes to them, "For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you" (Romans 1:11 NRSV). At the beginning of his letter to the Philippians, he tells them, "For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:8 NRSV). Aw, Paul! So sweet.

But after studying the words of Paul for a short time, I quickly realized that he can turn around and say something completely and totally infuriating, too. It might be challenging to be irritated with Paul because he is so sweet and charismatic. But there are times when he manages to say something so frustrating that I can't help but be angry with him. If heaven is the kind of place where we can interact with other people, one of my first tasks will be to find Paul, kick him in the shin three times, and then give him a hug. He has this incredible ability to communicate the gospel so clearly and effectively around the foot that it seems like is stuck so deeply into his mouth.

In the middle of the letter to the Philippians, Paul transforms from a kind and encouraging man to a self-impressed and narcissistic jerk. At this point in the letter, he

has already given the Philippian disciples the comfort and encouragement they so desperately needed. He reminds them of the example of Christ, and gently instructs them about how they are to live in the middle of persecution. Then, he immediately begins sharing his résumé with them. He says, “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil 3:2-6 NRSV).

Paul has totally mastered the humble brag. He is looking back on his life, at all the things he has accomplished. He is the Hebrew of Hebrews, the best and the brightest. He even says that he was “blameless” under the law. He actually tells them, “We should only have confidence in Jesus and not in our flesh — not in the things we have accomplished... Although, now that you mention it, I have accomplished a whole lot.” I can just imagine the poor, suffering Philippians reading this and thinking, “Here we go... We’d better settle in, Paul’s started talking about himself again...”

Luckily for the Philippians and for us, Paul doesn’t go on very long. However, he definitely makes his point. He continues, “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be

found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:7-11 NRSV).

Like always, Paul is totally justified in what he is saying. He does share with the Philippians his ridiculous résumé, and I’m sure initially it elicited the same response in them that it did in me. But the only reason he is listing all of his best qualities is to say that they actually don’t matter at all. He was indeed the top dog, the Pharisee of all Pharisees, a zealot who lived painstakingly by the letter of the law. But, Paul says, all of that is worthless. It’s rubbish, waste, excrement, trash. It is worthless to him now. He counts it as loss because there is nothing to gain from any of it.

Wait, what? Why would any of the encouragements and instructions that Paul had already given to the Philippians even matter, then? They wouldn’t need to have the same mind and the same love because it would all be pointless. Any excellence they tried to strive for in the midst of persecution would mean nothing if what Paul is saying is true. But Paul isn’t trying to be literal here. He isn’t actually saying that we should throw all caution to the wind and begin disregarding the law. He’s not advocating for the Philippians to enter into whatever kind of immorality or sin they want, because it doesn’t matter in the long run anyway. No, Paul is saying everything is worthless in comparison to the worth of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus is such a perfect savior that even the best of human beings, like good old Paul, is weak and useless in comparison.

What Paul wants the Philippian Christians to understand is that instead of the imperfect righteousness that some Jewish Christians were trying to force on them, they are recipients of the perfect righteousness that comes not through the law but through the fulfillment of the law, through Jesus Christ. There were some Christians of Jewish heritage who thought Gentiles must be circumcised and follow the law of Israel in order to become a Christian. But Paul knows that the Philippians are experiencing persecution both from the outside with the Romans and from the inside with these Judaizers. In the midst of temptation and persecution from all fronts, he desperately wants them to understand that there is nothing they can do to become right with God. The only reason they are considered righteous at all is because they have faith in Jesus Christ.

Two thousand years later, with our regularly published versions of scripture, our highly educated pastors, and our well-equipped worship teams, we think we have mastered what it means to be a Christian. It is so easy for us to look back at the poor Philippians and scoff at their foolishness. Paul would never need to warn us about falling into the trap he's describing, right? We all understand that the only way to be righteous is to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We all comprehend the fact that everything that the world says matters, everything that we are told to respect and admire, should fall under the category of "unimportant" for us as Christians. Even just speaking those words, I feel doubt beginning to set in.

This may be hard for some of you to believe, but I used to be a goody two shoes. I was the most well-behaved student. Although I was a hellish toddler, as soon as I was in school, I never stepped a toe out of line. I have this running joke with my parents that they can't actually be called parents because my brother and I were never actually

children... We were just born as little adults, with some minor exceptions when we were very young. Both of us never broke the rules at school or at home. We always made excellent grades, we always did what was asked of us. Even just thinking about breaking the rules made me feel guilty, which kept me in line for the duration of my childhood after my stint as a slightly disobedient toddlers.

Part of that mentality developed because I was in church every single week from the time I was born. I was baptized as an infant, and I spent Sunday mornings in classrooms and in a sanctuary where teachers and pastors taught me what was right and wrong, and how to live the good Christian life. I am grateful for those experiences because I learned what it meant to be a part of the church. I learned morality. I learned right from wrong. I learned how to be good.

But being good isn't enough. It isn't enough to be the top of the class. It isn't enough to sit in the pews and listen well, to be disciplined and faithful. Being good isn't enough because it isn't perfect. I was a good kid, yes. But I am still incredibly human. I still sin on a daily basis. Brokenness and imperfection are still at the very core of who I am. Even though I resist the temptation to listen to people who preach a false gospel and even though I persevere in my faith in hard times, I am still a far cry from the person of Jesus Christ. This is the point Paul was trying to drive home. He didn't share all those really great aspects of his life to tell the Philippians how awesome he is. He shares with them because he wants them to know how perfect Christ is.

Here's the thing about Paul: before he knew Christ, he was the perfect Jew. He did everything according to the law. He was a religious leader, and he was more passionate about the law than anyone else could claim to be. He even went so far as to

persecute anything that wasn't of the law, which often included the Christian church. No Jew could have brought anything against him; he was blameless, above reproach. Then, Paul encountered Jesus, and literally everything in his life was changed. His ethnic identity didn't matter, because we are all one in Christ Jesus. The law he loved so very much didn't matter because Jesus came to fulfill the law. His status as Pharisee didn't matter because Jesus didn't come to call the righteous, but the sinners. Everything that once defined him had become nothing to him in light of Jesus. How many of us can say that?

The good news for those of us who can't is that Paul doesn't just leave it there. He goes on, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:7-14 NRSV)

This man, whose identity used to lie in the reality of his perfection, admits his own failures in obtaining this goal. The great Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ, author of much of the New Testament, master of humble bragging, admits that he isn't quite there yet. And he knows that all who read his words are not there yet, either. He says, "I don't pretend like I've obtained this goal... but there is something I do: I lean into the perfect calling of God on my life through Jesus Christ." He leaves everything else behind. His old life, regardless of how perfect it really was, is in the past and he never looks back toward it again. Instead, he is ever looking at the perfect one, his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

What a conviction for a church that is full of men and women who, whether they know it or not, are trying so hard to earn unattainable righteousness. We hear so often, “It is faith that saves us, not works.” How well are we living that out? How many of us can honestly say that we don’t treat our faith like a checklist, like a necessary obligation inside of our otherwise perfect lives? How many of us can look at each other or even at ourselves and see the perfection in Christ that each of us has, regardless of our brokenness and imperfections?

Paul was worried for the Philippians because they were experiencing pressure from fellow disciples of Jesus to be better. In the midst of persecution from the Roman government, they were also facing what was likely pretty intense pressure from other Christians to clean themselves up before coming to Jesus. But, Paul says, even the best of us, even the top of the class, even the church leaders, the missionaries, the theologians among us are fully and completely imperfect in light of our perfect Savior. Lucky for Paul, for the Philippians, and for us, Jesus comes to us before we have done anything right. Jesus comes to us while we are still blatantly sinning against him. Jesus comes to us while we are still narcissistic jerks. Jesus comes to us when we put up a perfect front but secretly cringe at the brokenness inside of us. Jesus comes to us and offers us something that we could never achieve on our own. Jesus offers us perfection.

We are not there yet. Even the best among us are still impossibly far from the standard of perfection. But, thanks to Jesus, we don’t have to worry about just how far we really are. Jesus already traveled that distance with the cross. Now, like Paul, our only response is to take up our own crosses and follow him. Our only response is to forget who we were before, and press on toward the goal of our heavenly calling by God

through Jesus Christ. Let us be a people who are defined only by the perfection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:4-9

As a child, I spent time with my grandmother every single day. She was most definitely my favorite person in the world. Her name was Angilee, and she was in her sixties in my childhood, but she refused to be called “Grandma” or any other such name, because she thought it made her sound old. She insisted that her grandchildren should call her “Angie”, which we gladly did. Angie was a teacher at the school where my brother and I went, so every day she would take us home with her until our parents could get off work. She was what you might call a force of nature. Sometimes, she would speak the most empowering of encouragements to me. She would tell me how smart I was, or how much potential I had, how good I was at art or music or math or anything, really, despite my feeble attempts to be even a little bit as talented as she was. Those soft spoken words of encouragement are some of my favorite memories of my childhood.

If you can believe it, though, I was actually quite a trouble maker as a young child. Although I never broke the rules in school, I tended to be on the wrong side of my grandmother’s law, which to be fair was strict for a pre-school aged child. To give you an idea, some of my young childhood nicknames (usually inflicted upon me by my grandmother) included Mandy Mess, Demand-a, and my favorite, the Family Pest. I was really, really good at being horribly obnoxious. If I ever stepped one centimeter out of line, my grandmother would rip me apart. Her sweet, gentle face turned into one of wrathful doom the moment I caused trouble. At the time, I never understood why I would get a long lecture from her each time I did anything wrong. Looking back, though, I know she was working hard to shape me into a faithful disciple of Christ.

I loved her so much, and wanted to be just like her; so much so that I would do anything to please the woman who I thought hung the moon. As time went on, I got better and better at doing the right thing in her eyes. I was chewed out less and less, and encouraged more and more. Instead of feeling like one of her second grade students who needed to be constantly reprimanded, I felt like we had become friends. I wanted nothing more than to spend all my time with her, and learn how to be even more like her.

I think this is where we find the Philippians when Paul writes to them. They have been shaped and formed by Paul's example, enough so that he has nothing else to reprimand them for. Instead of telling them what they are doing wrong, he expresses joy from hearing about their faithfulness to God. He encourages them, and I bet they feel exactly like I did when my grandma stopped putting me in time out and began to enjoy my company, like we were old friends.

Unfortunately, Paul isn't just writing to them for simple encouragement. Both he and the Philippian disciples have been enduring harsh torment at the hands of the Roman government. The Philippians are living in a state of fear, both for their own lives and for Paul's. They are living lives of faithful uncertainty; they are holding to the gospel and Paul is so proud of them. But they don't know how to proceed in light of all the suffering they are experiencing. Their future is completely unsecured. I think in some way or another, we all know exactly how the Philippians must be feeling the wake of all of their afflictions. Sometimes as Christians we are stripped of the confidence we are told we have when it seems like there is no way for God to be active in our lives today.

When I was nine years old, my grandma got really sick. She suffered for months, and slowly faded away. At such a young age, I couldn't reconcile the strong, stubborn

woman I idolized with the sick, dying one in the hospital bed. I remember thoroughly believing there was no way she could die. I was told everyday about the goodness of God, and in my mind it made no sense that a good God would let her die. I knew that she was suffering; that much was obvious. But I was confident that she would survive. So, when she did die, I was devastated. How could a good God let this happen? I was confused, angry, and unimaginably sad.

The few days between her death and her funeral were probably some of the toughest of my life. I didn't know how to handle myself in light of what had happened. A world without my grandma wasn't one I knew how to navigate; it was unknown, and I had no idea what to do.

At her funeral, which I remember almost nothing of, my mom read a Bible verse. It was from the letter to the Philippians. She read, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil 4:4-9 NRSV).

The significance of what she read blew right past me in that moment. I didn't understand why anyone would read that during a funeral. Honestly, I don't even

remember this passage being read. But looking back, I see exactly why my mother chose to read that during a time of such grief.

Paul is not writing to the Philippians hoping they will be happy all the time. He isn't writing hoping that all of their thoughts will be positive, or that God will somehow fix their lives so that they only have to think about things of truth, nobility, righteousness, purity, loveliness, and admirableness. In fact, Paul is writing to the Philippians because he is absolutely certain their lives will be filled with turmoil from now on. He knows some of them will be killed for associating with Jesus, while others have to live in oppression, and he's pretty positive his death is coming too.

Despite all of that, he instructs them, "Rejoice in the Lord!" He isn't discounting their suffering. He himself is experiencing the same kinds of trials they are. He also isn't telling them life will be great because they believe in Jesus Christ. He's telling them that despite their persecution, despite their physical and mental suffering, despite their uncertainty about their survival, the Lord, the God of the universe, is near to them! Because of that, they should have joy. And although these words are written to people in a very different time and place than we are, they speak directly into our lives as well. We are instructed to rejoice in spite of our sufferings as well. Joy should be our reality no matter what else we experience, whether it is life on a mountaintop or life in a valley.

I also think there is a whole other layer to these final exhortations Paul writes. They are absolutely words of comfort and of encouragement, and we should read them as such. But they are also words of instruction and command. Paul provides for us a model of how to live in a world full of death and destruction and chaos. Not only do we rejoice in the Lord God, but we are to think and act upon the excellent and praiseworthy aspects

of the world around us, the world he created. We are to live lives worthy of the gospel; we are to move through life in such a way that we can honor the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and bring others to the knowledge of his grace. Paul no doubt recognizes that living in such a way is much simpler if not much easier in times of happiness and success. But he also knows the reality that neither he nor the Philippians have that luxury. I'm sure we can all agree that we don't have that luxury today, either. And perhaps just like them, we don't really even know how to proceed as people of faith when life is hard. We find it easier to blame God, or deny him rather than to accept the peace we are offered when we live prayerful lives of thanksgiving and joy.

In the many years since my grandmother has died, I have travelled through stages of grief, frustration, anger, and everything in between. Sometimes I miss her so much, and I often wonder what she would think of me now as an adult. As time has gone on and I have come to a greater maturity in my faith, though, I understand now how I am supposed to move forward as someone who lives with the knowledge of the gospel. I can think about my grandmother. I can think about how lucky I was to be able to spend even nine short years as her grandchild and her friend. I can think about the faithful Christian woman that she was, and the faithful Christian women she raised as daughters and granddaughters. I can think of the blessing that she was to me, ensuring I was raised as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I can think about her life, that exemplified the truth, nobility, righteousness, purity, loveliness, and admirableness of a Christ-centered person. And, I can shape my life to be one that is worthy of the gospel in the same way hers was.

Paul isn't speaking about a perfect life, or a life without suffering, or a life that is easy. He knows better than most what it means to suffer as a Christian. But because we

know that about him, it should make his words that much more meaningful and significant. Paul's plea is that in world where we are robbed of the joy we have, where fear takes hold of our lives much more often than security or happiness; his plea, his command is that we choose to live out the gospel of the God of peace and in doing so point others back to him.

If we're being honest, there are going to be many days in our lives where it would be much easier for us to give up on God and deny his existence rather than try to reconcile a good God with what we experience. On days when we struggle to see God's presence in the world, when our Christian brothers and sisters are persecuted and killed, and when in turn other Christians themselves persecute and kill people who don't know Christ; when a loved one slowly succumbs to a devastating illness, or when we turn on the news to see tragedy after tragedy; it is then that we are reminded to rejoice in the presence of the Lord because he is near to us.

We aren't instructed not to mourn, and not to be angry, and not to experience the range of emotions that humans naturally experience when it seems like the world is too far broken to be fixed. We will feel all of those things in this imperfect world, as Jesus did. However, we are instructed to also be comforted in the joy that comes with knowing the promises we do have through Jesus Christ; not promises of wealth, health and safety or promises of success but a promise that a day will come when God will wipe every tear from our eyes, when there will be no weeping or mourning because the old order of things, the old suffering and the old destruction and the old sin will pass away. And on that day, the brokenness in the world as we know it will be abolished, and we will live in

the eternal glory of the presence of God. That's why we can live in peace; we are children of the God of peace, whose promises never fail.

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