

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 8, 2008**

CONDUCT WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

Philippians 1:27-30

Remember the film “City Slickers?” The main character Mitch, who is played by Billy Crystal, has lost his smile. He does not understand why, he just knows he is unhappy with his life. His wife sends him off with his friends to try and find his smile. These three men approaching middle age go up to play “cowboys” and after learning some riding and roping skills, they assist with a real cattle drive.

The boss of this cattle drive is a real man’s man – a tough old cowboy named Curly, played by Jack Palance. Mitch and his friends are in awe, maybe even intimidated by the strength and ruggedness of Curly. At one point in the film Mitch and Curly are separated from the rest of the party and Mitch asks Curly, “Your life makes sense to you, doesn’t it?”

Curly replies: “You city folk. You worry a lot. You spend fifty weeks getting knots in your rope, and you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it.” He pauses a minute and then he goes on, “You know what the secret to life is?”

Mitch says, “No, what?”

“One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don't mean nothing.”

In frustration, Mitch asked, “What is that one thing?” To which Curly answered, “That is what you have to figure out.”

Well. being single-focused, like Curly, is great. The trouble is: “What is the one thing!” In Philippians 1:27-30, Paul instructs his readers what the “one thing” is for a Christian. But he does not give a vague command to just do something in life. His charge is specific. To conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The verse begins with an emphatic “only” – the NIV translates this as “whatever happens.” It means that no matter what – if Paul or the Philippians live or die, this is how they must live today. Let’s see what this single focus, this “one thing” is to be.

CONDUCT WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

Up to now in this letter to the Philippians, Paul has been writing from his own experience. You will remember that Paul was in prison for preaching about Jesus. About four years before the writing of this letter, he had been arrested in Jerusalem and was taken to Rome to stand trial before Caesar. The outcome of his trial was uncertain – he could be set free or he could be executed. At the time he wrote these words, he just didn’t know.

But Paul writes that in the middle of his ordeal he can rejoice. Why? Because he knows the gospel is being advanced because he is in prison, because of his circumstances, Christ is proclaimed all over Rome because of his chains and believers throughout the city are encouraged to boldly share their faith. People are hearing about and trusting in Jesus and Paul is overflowing with joy.

That's what made Paul tick. "For me to live is Christ," he says, "and to die is gain." Jesus Christ was the very centerpiece of his life. Paul could say, "In Him I live and move and have my being." God's purposes were his purposes, his desires were subordinated to the sovereign plan of God, even if it meant some suffering.

For Paul, Christ was his life, his all-in-all. He lived a life that was worthy of the gospel.

And he wants the Philippians – and us – to have the same attitude. To have the main thing be the main thing, the one thing in life to be this: That we would conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.

That's how Paul understood the Christian life. It is all about the gospel. Everything else – career success, graduations, good health, even the joys of church life like fellowship dinners and music programs – was secondary. He would write to the Corinthians:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:1-4)

What is the gospel? Put another way, what did Jesus' death accomplish? Why did He come? He bore on His back judgment for sin, God's vengeance for our sin, so that He might live and reign victorious in us. So that through His life given to us, we might have a new beginning, a way of life that will last forever.

The gospel is of first importance to the Christian. We are to live in a way that demonstrates we know that importance, that we understand and value what Christ has done for us. Like Jesus' Parable of the Great Pearl, where a merchant discovered a valuable pearl, recognized its great value and sold everything he owned and bought it, we are to value the work of the gospel in our lives and the lives of others. If we value the gospel, our lives will be lived in a way that reflects what we prize.

So, the "one thing" in the Christian life is that conduct which reflects our belief in the gospel.

In our passage, Paul uses a term which the Philippians well understood. In fact, conduct is much too simple a translation. Rather, Paul uses a word that means "to live as a good citizen." The root of the word he used refers to the *polis*, the city; it is the word from which we get our English word "politics."

And a *polis* like Philippi is not just any ordinary city. Philippi was a Roman colony and was granted special status by the Caesar after a great victory in the Battle of Actium. A large number of soldiers retired to this city and were granted Roman citizenship.

This special status evoked a sense of pride by its inhabitants. It was Rome away from Rome. They saw themselves as “Romans.” Rome was their mother and they never forgot to whom they belonged. They spoke Latin, wore Roman dress, called the magistrates by their Latin titles. They were deeply into Roman citizenship and all it meant.

So then the *polis*, the city, was not just a place to live. It was a partnership in which all people worked together. The individual citizen developed his abilities, talents and skills, not for his own sake, but for the benefit of this mini-Rome.

Against this background, Paul is reminding these believers that their lifestyle must reflect their faith. They are colonists, not of Rome, but of another city, another country. They are citizens of the kingdom of God.

Let’s pause for a moment and ask, “What does this mean for you and me?” How does Paul’s command “to live as a citizen” affect the way in which we live as citizens in the United States? In the next few weeks we will explore specifically what this means. Our conduct, our citizenship must reflect where our hearts lie, what we really value. As those chosen by the Father, purchased by the Son and sealed by the Spirit, we must not forget that our citizenship is in the kingdom of God and our lives are to reflect what God has done for us in the gospel.

How do we do this? Paul gives an answer in today’s passage: By standing firm in the knowledge that our God-given suffering demonstrates the work of Christ in our lives.

STANDING FIRM

In verse 27-28, Paul writes, *I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.*

The Philippians were to stand firm against opposition by those who were against the gospel. Their opponents were probably civic-minded Romans who did not like the Christian’s allegiance to a “Lord” other than Caesar. They thought that the Church’s attitude bordered on treason and challenged the political establishment and their valuable citizenship. So because of this, there was widespread persecution in Philippi. We saw this even at the beginning of Paul’s ministry in Philippi, when he and Silas were thrown in jail because their preaching upset the social order. That atmosphere of suspicion and hatred toward Christians continued.

So Paul tells the Philippians to stand firm, to hold their ground and do so with a purpose. He’s calling on them to stay true to their faith, even though the temptation and pressure to compromise or give up may be strong. They are to be courageous, tenacious, steadfast. Heavenly citizenship is costly and demanding.

Things are no different today. In our comfortable American culture, we may not experience violent persecution like they did in Philippi, but our society is decidedly not Christian. All around us are opponents to the gospel. In fact, scholars now call our country a “post-Christian” society.

Sometimes we find deliberate and forceful opposition to Christianity, especially when we try to openly exercise our faith in the schoolhouse or the public square. Most of the time, we find more

subtle intolerances by people who do not share our Christian values or understand our faith. There is temptation everywhere to compromise or abandon our beliefs when the going gets tough.

Living a life worthy of the gospel is not easy. It is hardly ever comfortable. Martin Luther King put it this way:

I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may. (Martin Luther King, Jr. "Paul's Letter to American Christians").

So a life worthy of the gospel means we don't live for a lesser ideal, we live for the main thing. Standing firm means firmly understanding what life is really all about.

The gospel. That Christ chose us in Him, He died for us, He saved us and we belong to Him. The good news is that God promises that everything He allows into our lives will contribute to our survival in His kingdom and ultimate good. Paul wrote to the Romans:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.

Listen to the promise here –

For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?

Do you believe that you are citizens of the kingdom of God? Do you believe that the God who saved you gives you everything you need? If you truly believe that, it will show in the way you conduct your lives. It will show what really has your heart.

Frankly, what we do when no one is watching, when we are alone, no accountability, when we are not on display, shows what is the one thing in our life, what we value the most.

Look a little further. Paul told us to *contend as one man for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way*. What is supposed to mark us in our struggle to stand firm is that we are a people who are united. We commit ourselves together, like glue, because we are of one mind. We have a shared affection for Jesus Christ. We are mobilized for a common cause as ambassadors for Christ. One faith, one truth, one gospel.

What causes this unity? Paul said that we *stand firm in one spirit*. All Christians are people of one spirit, one common ancestry. The Philippians' ability – and ours – to stand firm was supernatural, based on the Holy Spirit's work. They were to stand firm against attacks on the gospel as they relied not on themselves but on the work of the Spirit in their lives. Pastor Kent Hughes wrote:

“There is nothing here of bootstrap resolve. The Philippians were not asked to reach deep down in their inner person and will to pull themselves together. Their “No!” to Roman culture’s demands to compromise the gospel rested in what God had accomplished in their lives. (R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*.)

It is not about us. Not about our own ability or status or position. We are marked by the presence of God. Look around you. If the man or woman sitting next to you, or in the pew in front of you, has trusted in Christ’s saving work on the Cross, the Holy Spirit indwells that person. How does that impact how you relate to him? If you really believe that the spirit of God rests upon her, how does that affect your attitude toward her?

We are people of one spirit. The Spirit of Christ takes up residency in us and that creates a common bond.

OUR SUFFERING DEMONSTRATES THE GOSPEL

So any faithfulness we have, any conduct worthy of the gospel is powered by the Holy Spirit. That means it must be for a purpose. It is vulnerable and transparent. It is not invisible. It demonstrates the power of God in our lives.

Gospel power has to show itself, it must show itself. We see that in our text. Paul expects to hear about the Philippians’ conduct. It won’t be hidden. Somehow, through the ancient grapevine, he’ll hear about their behavior, just as all Rome has learned about his. Don’t be fooled. Nothing is hidden.

But that’s a good thing. Paul says that their steadfastness will be a sign both to themselves and to the opponents of Christianity, to those who will be saved and those who will be destroyed.

The kind of courage that marks our lives with poise and confidence must come from God. Paul tells the Philippians to not be frightened – the word does not mean an absence of fear, but a refusal to panic in times of trouble, like a frightened stampede of horses going wild at a thunderstorm.

If you are living in a manner worthy of the gospel your life will be marked by that kind of strength. Others will see it and the gospel will be advanced.

Most of us know of people right here in this church who show that kind of calm assurance in the middle of really tough circumstances. We have friends here who deal every day with cancer, financial difficulties, family problems, and yet rest in the Lord’s goodness. What produces that kind of life? The work of Christ in them!

They will tell you that the suffering that God allows in our lives is not a sign of His neglect. Rather, it is proof that His grace is working in our lives. Paul says in verse 29, *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him.*

Did you get that? The opposition, the suffering, the bad stuff in our lives have been granted to us. Suffering is a gift from God! How do we normally react to suffering? Most of us complain and grumble at the drop of a hat.

When we do that, we fail to understand what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom of God. We do not understand what the Christian life is really all about. Paul wrote to the Romans long before he went to prison to also rejoice in sufferings, *“because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us (Rom 5:3-5).*

Suffering has a purpose because it demonstrates the gospel to other people. . . and even more, it confirms the gospel to ourselves. As we learn to stand firm through the bad times, the gospel is worked out in our lives.

This gives us that assurance. When we trust and obey the Lord when persecution or pain or difficulty hits, our troubles will reshape the way we think and the way we react. Suffering will cause us to grow. Gordon-Conwell professor Scott Hafemann wrote:

The primary purpose of suffering is to make God known to us. This is not an easy “answer” to the problem of evil. To say that suffering ultimately exists so that God can glorify Himself by making Himself known in all His majesty and mercy is of little comfort for most people. Only those who recognize that their deepest joy is knowing God will take solace from such a conclusion. . . .

A poignant modern-day example is C. S. Lewis’s experience of meeting God through the severe suffering he encountered in the loss of his wife, Joy Gresham. More than 20 years earlier, in writing *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis had testified that suffering serves a good purpose, since it drives us to God: “It is not simply that God has arbitrarily made us such that He is our only good. Rather, God is the only good of all creatures...The kind and degree may vary with the creature's nature; but that there ever could be any other good is an atheistic dream.”

However, when Lewis's wife, with whom he had fallen in love and married late in life, died, Lewis confessed that his ideas about who God is and how He acts were called into question. Nevertheless, through his suffering, Lewis eventually came to know more profoundly than ever before the God he had written about. In Lewis's own words:

He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down...My idea of God was not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. God shatters it Himself. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence? And only suffering could do it. (Scott Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*).

CONCLUSION

Do we believe that we are citizens of the kingdom of God and conduct ourselves in a way that reflects that belief? A manner worthy of the gospel? Is our faith apparent when we suffer? Or does our response show something less than gospel-centered?

I must confess that, as Lewis put it, my temple is often a house of cards. As much as I long to conduct myself in the manner worthy of the gospel, I fall miserably short. More often than not, my thoughts and behavior show a wrong view of God and a misunderstanding of the gospel. I want my life to be comfortable, without trouble or difficulty, free from pain. When I don't get my way, I grumble and complain.

When no one is watching, when I am alone and not on display, I tend to live by what I value the most. And that is not always the main thing, advancement of the gospel. For that reason, God allows a little trouble into my life – not very much, because God is pretty gentle with me – but enough to teach me more about the God I preach and teach about – to live as a kingdom citizen, to stand firm in my troubles and show off the gospel. My itchy-bitsy suffering is a gift from God.

What about you? Are you focused on the main thing? What do you say or do or think when no one is watching? Does your reaction to the difficulties of life show the work of Christ in your life? Or do you grumble and complain? Are you in conflict with those around you? Is it hard for you to be content?

If so – and if I were a betting man, I'd give real money that everyone in this sanctuary struggles in this area – if so, the rest of the book of Philippians is for you. All of us are in it together, together for the gospel, in Kingstowne, Fairfax County, and our very own lives.

We need to conduct ourselves as citizens of the kingdom of God. We will do this by standing firm in the knowledge that our God-given suffering demonstrates the work of Christ in our lives. Let's begin today, to trust God for that work of the Spirit in our lives.

Let's live as kingdom citizens. Stand firm in your troubles and show off the gospel.