



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

“Worthy of the Gospel of Christ”

Philippians 1.27–30

David Anguish

Introduction

The authors of a popular-level introduction to Christian faith begin by asking their readers to consider the questions that everyone eventually will ask: “What is the meaning of life? How should I live? What can I hope for?” (Weed & Peterson 2000, 2). They offer help for considering those questions by reminding us of different answers that have been proposed:

Tragically, modern culture distracts our attention from life’s nobler pursuits. We are constantly offered an ever-changing menu of easy pleasures. Shallow and twisted models of the good life abound. Advertising invites us to acquire more things that meet artificial “needs.” The flickering images of movies and TV constantly distort and trivialize life’s deeper meanings (Weed & Peterson 2000, 4).

They follow that with the additional caution that religion may do no better than the other proposals:

Some turn to religion or spirituality, perhaps for the same reasons that we join the Little League or PTA: “it’s nice to belong to something,” “it’s good for the children.” In such cases, religion simply fills a small space in otherwise full and busy lives. Here “religion” is only one among several other goods; it is not a life-defining commitment that shapes and orders all other commitments. In fact, religion may even be viewed as useful in gaining other goods to which we are really more committed—health, success, or even family (Weed & Peterson 2000, 5).

Can this really be part of the advice in a book that recommends the Christian faith? Yes, because it helps us focus on what really matters, the “life-defining commitment that shapes and orders all other commitments.” Isn’t that what Paul shows us in Philippians? He says he had abandoned an excellent practice of religion so he could know Christ (3.2–11). That passage is the climax of the call he issues throughout the letter’s body, beginning in our text (1.27–30) where he reminds us what our focus should be.

Paul's Declaration (27a)

The command that begins the sentence that runs through v. 30 gets immediately to the heart of things: “Only worthy of the gospel of Christ, live as citizens” (v. 27, literal translation). “Live as citizens” (NLT) translates πολιτεύομαι (*politeuomai*). The ESV translates it, “manner of life.” The NIV and NASB translate it, “conduct yourselves.” The verb appears only here and in Acts 23.1; the noun πολιτεύμα (*politeuma*) appears in Philippians 3.10.

I'll explain later why I think the NLT's translation is warranted but will first call attention to Paul's emphasis on “the gospel of Christ.” Though we are never surprised to see Paul focus on Christ, it noteworthy that he does so more in chapter 1 (18 times) than in chapters 2–4 (19 times total). His focus on “the gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) also gets our attention. The word appears six times in chapter 1 (vv. 5, 7, 12, 16, 27); all are vital to Paul's point. He uses it only three times in the rest of the letter (2.22; 4.3, 15). Considering the two ideas together, it is clear that what matters to him was that the Philippians live up to their calling, that they live in a way that was worthy of the gospel of Christ and the commitment to see it advance.

The nature of the commitment he had in mind becomes clearer when we look closer at the verb *politeuomai*. Although, as noted above, many translate it with phrases like “conduct yourselves” and “manner of life,” a different translation should be used. It's not the same word Paul typically uses when he intends to urge the right conduct of a manner of life; that word, which is περιπατέω (*peripateō*), means “to go about, walk around,” reflects the Jewish metaphor of “walking.” But the issue is not that Paul chooses another word for the Philippians; he will use *peripateō* in 3.17–18.¹ Nor does the word he does choose fits better with the word “worthy” (ἀξίως, *axiōs*); he uses that word with *peripateō* three times (Eph 4.1; Col 1.10; 1 Thess 2.12).

Why, then, a different word here? The answer is found in the significance of the word *politeuomai* in Philippi, a Roman colony largely settled by army veterans. Greco-Roman authors commonly used it to refer to the idea of living in the *polis* as a free citizen (Fee 1995, 161 n. 21). But in Philippi, it had a special significance. As Roman soldiers, they were proud of their privileged status as a Roman colony and their right to live as citizens there; Philippi was “little Rome.” But in 1.27 and 3.20, Paul is calling on the church to look beyond their citizenship in their world's greatest nation and instead “‘live in the Roman colony of Philippi as worthy citizens of your heavenly homeland.’ That, after all, is precisely the contrast made in 3:17–20, where ‘our “citizenship” is in heaven,’ in contrast to those whose minds are set on ‘earthly things’” (Fee 1995, 162).

What Real Life Should Look Like (27b–28a)

What does “living as citizens” of heaven look like in practice? Paul answers with words that were especially important for the Philippian church. First, in the clause that continues into verse 28, he says there are two spheres in which they should keep “standing firm” (the main verb, στήκω; *stēkō*): (a) “in one spirit,” taken by most translations and many commentaries to refer to their attitude and spirit of cooperation;² (b) and “with one mind,” taking ψυχή (*psychē*) to refer to the seat and center of the inner life (v. 27).

Second, they were to demonstrate the manner of their solidarity³ with each other in two ways: (a) in their “striving,” or competing (συναθλέω, *synathleō*), “side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v. 27); and (b) by “not being intimidated [πύρω, *ptyrō*] in any way by [their] opponents” (v. 28 NET). Instead, they were to rely on “the faith of the gospel,” a phrase that here probably refers more to the content of the teaching than to trusting in the good news.

These two expectations point to two major themes in Philippians. First, there was the challenge posed by a world that resists the gospel, a point Paul has already made (1.7) and to which he will refer both directly and indirectly again (cf. 2.1–13, 17, 20–21, 29–30; 3.14–17, 20–21). Second, there was the challenge of strained fellowship which he will elaborate beginning in 2.1–4 (cf. 2.12–18; 4.2–3). Both ideas provide us with insight into our search for purpose in life by addressing longings that are part of our search. Paul is reflecting Jesus’s teaching that it is in dying that we find life (cf. Matt 16.25). He is also implicitly calling us to a life where our need for relationships, inherent in our being from creation (Gen 2.18), is satisfied.

The Life Worth Living (28c–30)

But is the life Paul describes really worth the effort? The last part of verse 28 anticipates that the Philippians might well ask such a question. We know the answer should be, “Yes,” but how can we be sure? Paul gives what amounts to four answers.

First, he says that the troubles they experienced for their faith were evidence of their salvation (v. 28). The ESV translates this part of the verse, “This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.” But the NASB’s translation is better for seeing Paul’s point: “... which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and this too, from God.” He’s not saying that opponents who reject the gospel will receive a sign, but that their presence as opponents is a sign from God for those who have accepted the gospel.

Second, he stressed that what they were experiencing was from God. The verb translated, “granted” (“graciously granted” in the NRSV) is a passive form of χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*), the verbal form of the word, “grace.” Paul typically used it to mean “give graciously” or, by extension, “to forgive” (cf. 1 Cor 2.12; Gal 3.18; Rom 8.32; Phlm 22; Col 3.13; Eph 4.32). In Philippians, he was saying that the efforts of their opponents were also part of God’s grace (cf. Jas 1.2–4).

Third, their efforts mattered because they were for Christ (v. 29). The suffering Paul had in mind was not that which was common to living in a fallen world; nor was it a matter of being picked on for taking a stand or for being different. It was suffering “on behalf of Christ” and it was the expected lot of disciples who were maturing into his image. In other words, this phrase foreshadows the ultimate example the Philippians were to follow (cf. 2.5–11).

Fourth, their efforts mattered because they imitated and validated the teaching of their beloved teacher (v. 30). If such suffering made Paul exemplary and guaranteed his salvation (1.19), it would surely do the same for them.

Conclusion

In a recorded lecture I once heard, apologist Ravi Zacharias told of someone he met in Boston during one of his first preaching campaigns. After the service, an associate introduced him to a woman who had responded that night to his message. She had filled out a card, and in the space marked “Profession,” had written “prostitute.” Zacharias looked at her and said, “Is this true?” She said it was and told him how that night, on her way to the corner where she typically worked, she was walking past the building where he was speaking. The sermon title on the sign made her stop and go in. It said, “The Meaning of Life.” She said her emptiness had been satisfied in the story of Jesus.

There are several questions of additional detail I’d like to ask, the main one of which is, what had led her to become a prostitute? Maybe, at the beginning, it was the need to feel someone cared about her. Maybe it was the promise of the money she would make, or the lifestyle she would be able to afford. Whatever it was, her life was empty until she turned to Jesus. Not to a religion, to Jesus.

I tell her story because, despite diverse circumstances, you and I are not all that different from her. We too want to feel cared about, experience the prosperity the good life promises, enjoy a lifestyle that exclaims, “success,” etc. And we, too, are left empty until we find Jesus and live for the sake of the gospel. Not religion. Jesus.

Why, then, do you live? What do you hope for? What have you tried in an effort to fill the emptiness, the void words cannot fully describe and our consumer world, despite its promises, cannot fill? Why not live the life that is worthy of the gospel of Christ? Nothing you will do today is more important.

www.davidanguish.com

Works Cited

- Gordon D. Fee. 1995. *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Michael R. Weed & Jeffrey Peterson, eds. 2000. *Things That Matter: A Guide to Christian Faith*. 3rd ed. Christian Studies Press.

Notes

¹ In all, he uses the verb *peripateō* 32 times in his letters. Rom 6.4; 8.4; 13.13; 14.15; 1 Cor 3.3; 7.17; 2 Cor 4.2; 5.7; 10.2-3; 12.18; Gal 5.16; Eph 2.2, 10; 4.1, 17; 5.2, 8, 15; Phil 3.17-18; Col 1.10; 2.6; 3.7; 4.5; 1 Thess 2.12; 4.1, 12; 2 Thess 3.6, 11.

² But see Fee 1995, 163-164, who argues that the reference is to God’s Spirit, the one who would best be able to keep them from being frightened in any way (v. 28).

³ Both the verbs for “striving” (συναθλοῦντες, *synathlountes*) and “frightened” (πτυρόμενοι, *ptyromenoi*) are Greek participles.