

June 13, 2021

**A Letter from Paul – Philippians**  
**IV. Let Your Manner of Life Be Worthy**  
**Philippians 1:27-30**

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Last Sunday we heard Paul tell the Philippians that he was not concerned over the outcome of his imprisonment in Rome. Whether his trial resulted in either his death or his release, he would be at peace. Provided – his only concern, either way – provided that Christ would be honored and glorified through him and through his actions:

*It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.<sup>1</sup>*

And now, in the passage we read this morning, Paul turns his attention to the Philippians and says to them, in effect, “And I challenge you to do the same”: “*Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.*”

Earlier, in the opening section of his letter, Paul had talked about how, through his witness in prison, the Roman Imperial Guard had come to know of Christ – and many more outside of the prison and outside of the imperial court had been inspired by Paul’s witness to Christ as well.<sup>2</sup> He now has something similar in mind when he writes to the Philippians that their manner of living be worthy of the gospel. His concern is less about their personal, individual moral conduct (although that is certainly part of it), but more about the witness to Christ that they are making to the people of Philippi who have not yet come to know Christ. He is telling them that by the way they seek to honor and glorify Christ daily in their bodies, their actions and words, they too can bear a powerful witness to the Gospel of grace in Jesus.

Which reminds me of one of my favorite passages from one of my favorite old sermons – one preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick in the Riverside Church of New York City back in the early 1930’s. The sermon is entitled, “What Are You Standing For?”, and here is the passage:

*Our morning’s thought concerns one of the most significant aspects of human life: our representative capacity. We all have in us the power to stand for something, and the way we use it determines, as hardly anything else does, our personal quality . . .*

*This challenge no one of us can evade. The smallest of us can stand for the greatest things. A lantern can represent the same*

*cause of light that the sun stands for, and in its corner of the world a lantern can often do what the sun could never do. So no one of us can escape the question: What are we standing for?*<sup>3</sup>

And that's what I think Paul is trying to get at when he challenges both the Philippians and us to let our manner of living be worthy of the gospel of Christ. It's not so much about our personal morality as it is about our capacity to represent Christ to the world, to present Christ and the good news of His grace to those around us – as Paul has done in Philippi and now is doing from his prison cell in Rome. To present to the world through our daily living a witness to Christ, and to the transforming power of the gospel by which we are being redeemed. To show others, through our daily manner of living, the truth of that gospel, as well as the proof of the difference that gospel can make in a human life.

Now I suppose that when we think of doing this, of being this, we are daunted by the thought that it means that we must always be doing “great things for God”, as the currently popular slogan goes. And I suppose that when we think of Paul's missionary work, we tend to think of it in this way – all those journeys, all the cities he visited and the all the lives he touched. But the truth is that even Paul's evangelism was essentially both local and highly personal. It was not about doing “great things for God” so much as it was about just ordinary living and speaking in such a way that his passion for Christ was obvious to all whom he met, and so awakened in them a curiosity and a desire to know more about the Christ Paul so passionately proclaimed. In other words, when Paul says that our daily manner of living, worthy of the gospel of Christ, can bring glory and honor to Christ by bearing witness to others about the grace of Christ, he is talking about something you and I can readily do, every day. And something which we must do as those who belong to Jesus and who have been instructed by Jesus to bear witness. Paul is not telling us to go do “great things for Christ” – though that certainly is not excluded. What he is telling us is that the best and most effective witness we can bear to Christ comes through the manner in which we live each day – through the ordinary ways our faith finds expression in our daily words and deeds, which others observe and perhaps will then seek to understand. Daily acts of daily faithfulness, bearing witness to Christ by the manner in which they reflect His presence in our lives, His grace active in our minds and hearts and bodies.

For example – simple example – I heard a hospital chaplain talk about attending an Ash Wednesday service on his lunch break. When he returned to the hospital, he had already completely forgotten about the ashes upon his forehead. He went into a room to visit one of the patients and, as soon as he walked in, this dear soul looked up at him, saw the ashes, and assumed it was just a smudge of dirt he had somehow gotten on his face. She grabbed a tissue and wet it in her water glass and said to him, “*Come here, hon, you've gotten into something.*” He immediately remembered the ashes on his forehead and quickly said, “*No, those are ashes. They are supposed to be there.*”

Which mystified her completely – she had never heard of such, and she looked at him like he was crazy. So he explained to her about Ash Wednesday. He explained about how the ashes symbolize that on our own we are vulnerable and weak, and above all else mortal. But also how the ashes, applied in the shape of a cross, symbolized how God has come to be with us precisely in those moments when we feel broken and life seems hopeless. And about how the ashes also

point towards Good Friday and Easter Sunday, when Jesus overcome our weakness and death once and for all. And the woman thought about that for a moment, and then said, *“I think I want some of those ashes.”* So the chaplain took from the smudge on his own forehead and traced upon hers the sign of that cross by which we are saved.<sup>4</sup>

And, you see, there was nothing spectacular, bold, or big about that encounter. By the manner of his living, by the simple fact that he attended an Ash Wednesday service and was not ashamed to bear the ashes upon his forehead when he went back to work, that chaplain brought honor and glory to Christ – and was given a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel of Christ with someone who did not even know yet how deeply she needed and desired that gospel, that grace, that Christ. So, not so much doing “big things for God”, as just simply be willing to let Christ appear in our words and in our deeds in all the ordinary stuff of our daily living.

*“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”* I think of a man in my first congregation whose name was Al, who drove a bread delivery truck for a living. On the surface, Al just seemed like an ordinary guy, living an ordinary life. He certainly didn’t seem overly interested in the things of Christ – in fact, he used to fall asleep during many of my sermons, which, looking back, could have been my fault as a young preacher more than his as an old Christian. Still, the only time I ever heard Al get passionate about anything was when the conversation came around to how much he loved the New York Yankees or, on the other hand, how much he hated the Philadelphia Phillies (I was always with him one hundred percent on one of those two).

Then one day I needed a new bookcase for my office. Al knew a guy would give the church a good deal, so off he and I went to the furniture store. I picked out my bookcase and we sat down with the furniture dealer to haggle over the price. At one point Al had to excuse himself to go to the restroom, which left me sitting there alone with the furniture dealer. The dealer watched Al leave the room and then leaned across the table and said to me, *“That’s one great guy there, Preacher.”* And he said it with such feeling that it really kind of shocked me a little bit. Not that I didn’t think Al was a decent guy – but a great guy? What had I been missing? The dealer continued. He said, *“Al was the one that got me through it after my wife died. I don’t know what I would have done without him. And not just me, Preacher, he has helped an awful lot of folks when they were down.”*

I asked him to tell me more – and out came a portrait of Al as a man with a deep and compassionate heart, someone who always made time for anyone who was struggling, someone who was always willing to help when someone was in need. And when Al came walking back into the room, he no longer looked like the same man to me. In fact, I could swear I could just see the faint outline of a halo around his head. Because quietly, quietly, without calling any attention to himself ever, Al was daily living out a manner of life that not only brought glory to Christ, but which also brought the love of Christ, the gospel of Christ, the grace of Christ into the lives of others when they needed it most. Not so much doing “great things for God” as just daily living in such a way that he witnessed to the goodness of God by the character and quality of his words and deeds.

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Worthy of the love with which Christ has first loved us. Which makes me think of one last story – a story which comes from Presbyterian pastor Winn Collier’s wonderful book, Love Big, Be Well:

*A few months ago, Don Brady was our Sunday greeter, shaking hands as folks exited church. But Don takes joy in sending people out the door every week. As you know, he stands in the narthex, kissing the babies and the matronly women, sneaking candy to the kids, and dishing out hugs to anyone who will receive them. Is there a better sight than watching this big hunk of a man stooping down and enfolding another person in his massive arms? “Thanks for coming. You’re something special.” I swear I’ve heard those words a hundred times, but they still seem fresh to me.*

*On this particular Sunday, I had repeated Jesus’ words about the centrality of love and observed how sad it is whenever Christians turn out to be the meanest folks in town. A middle-aged man was visiting, and he grew visibly irritated. He shook his head and leafed aggressively through his Bible. Before the doxology’s final note settled, he hurried, head down, toward the parking lot. The flustered man moved so quickly that he missed Don at the back door, but Don would have none of that. He told me how he caught up to the fellow at his car and thanked him for joining us.*

*The man fiddled with his keys in the door of his Honda, offering a gruff “Thanks” in reply.*

*“We’d love to have you again sometime,” Don said, making a second pass.*

*“Not likely.” The man opened his door and tossed his jacket onto the passenger seat.*

*“Are you all right?” Don asked. He is nothing if not persistent.*

*The man was **not** all right. For the next ten minutes, this serious-minded fellow unleashed a theological discourse that had obviously been corked and building pressure for the last hour. He quoted Calvin and Augustine and Spurgeon. The man was frustrated with sappy churches and squeamish pastors who go lite on wrath.*

*Don was unfamiliar with most of these arguments. He simply listened, allowing the steam to dissipate. The exasperated man paused for breath, then concluded: “So, a lot of the Bible you’ve got to explain. Can you really say **love** holds everything else in place?”*

*Don considered this question, telling me later how he felt in over his head but also how he wanted to honor the fellow’s concerns. The parking lot was nearly empty, and quiet. Don answered carefully, “Yep, I think that’s the meat of it. Love’s the main deal.”*

*... I've preached a truckload of sermons on [this topic], and darn it if Don Brady, standing in an empty parking lot, didn't nail it better than I ever have. It's love. Love's the main deal.*<sup>5</sup>

“Only let your manner of living be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” There is a whole lot more that could be said about this passage – Paul mentions the importance of the unity of the church in Christ, as well as the likelihood that some will respond to our witness to Christ with hostility. But I think we have found the right place to conclude. With love. For when it comes to living lives worthy of the gospel of Christ – lives which daily and humbly bring glory to Christ, even as they bear witness to the grace of Christ to those who need it most – the main deal really is love. A life worthy of the gospel of Christ is a life daily marked by the love of God, and by that same love reaching out through our words and through our deeds, in love, towards those who are our neighbors. To let our manner of living be worthy of the gospel of Christ is – in the end, the main deal – is to let our lives be filled and overflowing with God's love.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:20.

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 1:12-14.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Secret of Victorious Living: Sermons on Christianity Today (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934), p. 217, 220.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, Testimony (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 126-127.

<sup>5</sup> Winn Collier, Love Big, Be Well (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), pp. 55-57.