

RCC in the Word
Week of August 26
Philippians 1:12-18

"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

One of the applications we can gain from Paul's example and his words in these few verses is that we are called to put the advancement of the gospel at the center of our goals and desires. Let's look at the flow of Paul's argument here.

Apparently, some of his critics thought Paul had let down the side rather badly by getting himself arrested. You can imagine the reasoning of his critics. Some of them may have been saying things like, "Depending on how the case turns out, Paul's arrest could bring Christianity into ill repute." Or "Paul is constantly rushing headfirst into things when a cooler, wiser head would have been more cautious." Or "Why did he have to go get arrested anyway?"

But as we read, Paul has few regrets for what he did. Look at verse 12 and you see what Paul really cares about: not his own comfort, but the advance of the gospel. He gives two reasons in defense of his judgment.

First, his arrest and imprisonment have resulted in the whole Praetorian guard hearing that he has been arrested for Christ's sake (verse 13). The entire Praetorian guard, at full strength, would have numbered about 9,000 men. Now did all those men know Paul? Could they have all rotated through guarding him? We don't know, but that is probably unlikely. More likely, is that the whole guard knew of his situation because Paul was such an extraordinary prisoner. His witness to Christ was strong and, and so stories about him circulated quickly. Those who guarded Paul heard the gospel and his personal testimony and then told others. Paul didn't spend his time protesting his innocence or trying to impress Caesar, or aiming to get himself released. Rather, he spent his time talking about a Jew named Jesus, who had been crucified and somehow risen from the dead.

Second, read verse 14. Persecution often strengthens our faith. You may know the story of the likes of Jim Elliott and the four other men who lost their lives trying to take the gospel to the Auca Indians. After their death, many more students from Wheaton gave themselves to missionary service. Because of the

death of the Auca five (what Jim and the other men were called), many were encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

Although Paul's ambitions are focused on the spread of the gospel, he is also a realist. He sees that not everything about his imprisonment is perfect. Read 1:15-18. Who are these people who preach Christ out of selfish ambitions? Well, they are not heretics. They are not preaching another gospel. If they were Paul would have words for them like he does to those in Galatians 1:8-9, whom he calls "anathema." All Paul wants to know is which Jesus they preach. We must be asking ourselves the same questions, is the Jesus we hear preached the Mormon Jesus, the Jehovah Witness Jesus, the liberal Jesus, the health-wealth Jesus, the preschool Jesus? Or are they preaching the biblical Jesus and his true message of good news? As long as Paul hears that the true Jesus and his true gospel are being preached, Paul rejoices that Christ is proclaimed.

In fact, these are not dangerous false teachers. Paul would have exposed them if they were. These speak the true gospel, but they do so with ulterior motives. These are likely the people behind verse 12 that think Paul has done damage to the Christian cause by getting himself arrested. They are likely magnifying their own ministries while putting Paul down. Perhaps they would say something like, "It really is sad that so great a man as Paul has frittered away his gospel opportunities simply because he is so inflexible. After all, I and many others manage to remain at large and preach the gospel. One must assume that Paul has a deep character flaw that puts him in the path of trouble. My ministry is being blessed, while he languishes in prison."

How does Paul handle this? He has feelings like anyone else, but he has deep core principles. It is more important to him that the gospel is preached than whether his personal respect in the church grows or not. He can say that the important thing is that Christ is preached, and also say that because of this, he can rejoice (verse 18).

Paul's example is clear. Put the advance of the gospel at the center of your own goals. Our own comfort, our hurt feelings, our reputations, our misunderstood motives, are all insignificant in comparison with the advance of the gospel. What are your aspirations? To make money? To get married? To travel? To retire early? These are not bad things. But the question we must ask is are these goals pushing the Christian's central goal to the side? Our primary goal must be the advance of the gospel. Our center must be in the gospel. There are many great groups that we can get involved in. We can spend so much of our time on good causes. To stop abortion, to speak out for justice, a certain style of worship, even reformed theology. We can make all these things the center of our faith. But these have to be peripheral. The center of our faith must be on Jesus. In all we do, we need to constantly ask ourselves, how am I proclaiming the centrality of the gospel.

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This devotional is adapted from D.A. Carson's *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*