

Introduction to Philippians Sermon / COB / 07.17.16

Introduction

- † **[1: river]** What's the biggest mistake you can make with the Bible? Not reading it. If you are not willing to listen to God, to learn from his revelation... you will never know God well, you will miss out on being strengthened by his promises, you will fall into the traps you could have avoided with his guidance, and you will never grow to be the person he created and saved you to be. Sad stuff, that!
- Come on, reading and reflecting on one page per day, an investment of ten minutes per day, is certainly possible for you! My sister has tea with Jesus, my mother has coffee with Jesus. You could find those ten minutes to know God well.
- † **[2: 4.13]** Even with an open Bible, you might make mistakes. A common one is to focus only on verses you like – you know – the ones that get posted with pretty pictures on Facebook.
- **Philippians 4.13 NET: I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me.**
 - Great memory verse! But do you know what Paul is really saying here? We memorize this verse and use it to mean whatever we want it to mean, but the context clearly has a singular meaning.
 - I will give you a hint, the empowerment Paul discussed has nothing to do with getting back into shape, succeeding in your job, or having an effective ministry. Context is important! Otherwise you miss the point and misapply the scripture!
 - **[3: 4.6-7] Philippians 4.6-7 NET: Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, in every situation, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, tell your requests to God. And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**
 - That's a splendid thought, and like v.13, this passage is worthy of memorization, so the Holy Spirit can bring it to mind, to encourage you when you most need it.
 - But if this is all you get out of Philippians, you are missing most of what the letter has to offer! Philippians has some beautiful passages, poetic even, but to get the full value out of the scripture, we need to study the whole letter not just the pretty parts.
 - And if you take these verses out of their literary context, you might miss their true meaning or miss out on part of what is necessary to realize that peace! In fact, you might sabotage your own peace, because you did not learn the context of these verses. At a time when so many of us crave true peace of mind and heart, that's a tragic mistake.
- † **[4: commands]** A related mistake is to look only at the commands in scripture. Commands are important, because they teach us how to reflect God's character, how to represent him here, how to do his will and live righteously, how to avoid worldly and fleshly mistakes.
- But the commands in a letter like Philippians are derived from the theology of the letter. If you focus only on the commands and neglect the theology, then you never understand why God commands these things; and you end up trying to change in your own power, instead of realizing the transformation of character that comes through the renewing of your mind when the Holy Spirit interacts with the deeper truths of the Word of God in you.

- Focusing only on commands also will lead you to live like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, very legalistic about following the rules, but never developing a heart like God's.
- † The opposite problem is to focus just on the theology. Sure, theology is important, you need to understand the big picture about God, yourself, human history and the future.
- But one function of theology in the Bible is to form the basis for the commands. If you focus only on the theology and ignore the commands, then while you might understand God better, you still are not applying his revelation to your life, and thus you become puffed up with knowledge, prideful, instead of sanctified in God's grace.
- † **[5: 2.6-8]** One more related mistake is to dwell only on what looks most important.
- **Philippians 2.6-8 NET:** [Christ] **who though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, [that is] by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross!**
 - This is tremendously important theology! It reveals that Christ shares the divine essence and equality with God the Father! It reveals that Jesus was fully God and fully man! It reveals that Christ's death on the cross was voluntary, in obedience to the will of God the Father!
 - That is a lot of deep stuff in a short space! But if this is all you get out of Philippians, you still are missing most of what it offers. And if you take these verses out of context, you might even miss the main point that Paul is making in this part of his letter. He actually says all this about Christ to make a point about us.
- † **[6: title]** These days, most churches do not preach through books of the Bible verse by verse. It's not what people want to hear.
- As a result, people miss out on much they could have learned in church; and in the process we train them to study the Bible with wrong methods, so that they miss out on much in their home study also, and thus they never come to know a lot of what God has revealed for them.
 - Philippians is one of my favorite books in the Bible. As we study it verse by verse over the next few weeks, we will seek to understand the letter as a whole, as well as each part, so we can truly understand what God is revealing to us for our benefit. Let me pray briefly...

Approach

- † **[7: 1.1]** To begin, we have to ask ourselves "Why did the human authors write this letter?"
- Philippians 1.1 tells us the authors are Paul and Timothy. If we have read the book of Acts [or if we are using a good introduction or commentary to help us study], we know they founded the church in Philippi on Paul's second big missionary journey, and they revisited the Philippian church on Paul's third big missionary journey. So now we need to figure out what would compel them to write this letter to the Philippians.
 - What was the reason for writing? Why was it so urgent to write instead of waiting until they could visit again? Why did God think this letter was so important that it should be included in the New Testament for all believers to study for the rest of time?

- You see, Paul and Timothy were not firing off a friendly letter here. Maybe they wrote such friendly letters, but God did not put them into the Bible. What we have here is a letter with a purpose, with teaching points to make. We need to figure out what those points are.
- † **[8: chart]** All the authors of New Testament letters wrote because their target readers were facing some sort of problem.
- There was an antagonist or group of antagonists – from within the church or outside of it – who were using bad theology to pressure the readers to think and act in bottom-line, fleshly ways.
 - To counter this problem, the author uses good theology to exhort the reader to think and act on the top-line, by God’s revelation, and provides some top-line commands as examples of how the reader can act rightly toward themselves, God, other believers, the antagonists, or the lost.
- † So when I study an epistle, before I think too deeply about any particular verse or passage, I try to get a handle on the big picture.
- I get a printout of the letter; you can photocopy your physical Bible or print it out from the web. I also grab various colored highlighters or pens, and then I read through the letter and highlight anything I can learn about the writers in one color and about the readers in another color.
 - **[9: author/reader]** **Philippians 1.1 NET: From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.**
 - So right there I have the basics: Paul and Timothy are writing to all the believers in the Philippian church, and specifically mentioned are the deacons and the overseers, who were the pastor/elders.
- † **[10: author]** As we read through the letter, we get more information.
- Paul is an apostle [1.16], but he once was a Pharisee who persecuted non-conforming Jews such as the early Christians in Jerusalem [3.5-6]. Then he in turn was mistreated for becoming a Christian who shared the gospel, including when he was in Philippi [1.30].
 - Paul and Timothy considered themselves slaves for Christ [1.1] and gave up everything for Christ, thereby proving their credibility [2.22; 3.7-8]. And they learned to truly walk by faith, trusting in God and seeking to serve God despite the harsh troubles that came into their lives because of the gospel mission [1.18-20; 2.16-17; 3.12-14].
 - We learn that Paul is in prison in Rome because of the gospel mission [1.7, 13-14, 17; 4.22], but that he continues to do successful ministry in prison [1.12-14; 4.22], and – because he can pursue the gospel mission in prison – he has learned to be content there [4.11-13]!
 - Can you imagine that? I wake up discontented because I have some unwelcome tasks that day or my sheep are being particularly stubborn and wayward or we are out of milk for my coffee. I get anxious about a stock market crash or my cat’s health or whether the teenagers like me.
 - Because of the gospel mission, Paul has repeatedly been imprisoned, repeatedly been beaten, even to the point of death, yet he presses on. As he writes, he is in prison in Rome, without any comforts or wealth or family, yet he can say he has learned to be content and at peace! That makes me want to study this letter, so I can learn to have that.

- † **[11: readers]** As we read through the letter, we learn that Paul and Timothy have a good relationship with the Philippian readers. They know them personally, having founded the church [1.3; 2.12, 16], they are thankful for the Philippians, they pray for them, they long to be with them again and trust that they will [1.3-9, 25-26; 2.22-24].
- The Philippians, we learn, have responded well to the gospel, learning to be obedient [2.12], defending and confirming the true gospel of Christ [1.5-7], and supporting Paul as a missionary [4.10, 15-16], including sending one of their ministry leaders, Epaphroditus, to bring financial support and aid to Paul in prison [1.7; 2.25; 4.10-18].
 - We also learn they now are experiencing some of the same suffering they witnessed in Paul when he was with them [1.29-30]. That raises questions in my mind. Some of us have faced social pressure about our faith in the workplace, at school, in our neighborhoods or even families; will Paul argue that all Christians suffer? If so, will he reveal how to endure or overcome it? That would be valuable knowledge.
- † **[12: antagonists]** With all my notes about the authors and readers, I read through the letter again trying to figure out some preliminary ideas about the antagonists who are causing trouble for the readers. This can be challenging, but I look for people the authors speak against.
- In this letter, Paul speaks out against more than one group. But if we are careful, we can piece together who is really the problem.
 - The Philippians apparently were experiencing persecution from pagan Gentiles in their town, just as Paul had [1.29-30]. But there are more dangerous antagonists in Paul's mind.
 - As we read, we learn Paul's primary antagonists are religious, but not true believers, since Paul calls them enemies of the cross of Christ and evil workers [3.2, 18], who will face destruction for opposing the true gospel [1.28; 3.19].
 - They are legalistic, seeking righteousness from the Mosaic Law [3.2-9].
 - And they both trust in their own efforts and set their minds on worldly things, both of which are fleshly behavior [3.2-3, 19].
 - Again this is interesting, because even if we do not face exactly the same situation in our lives, we can learn from this. We are in a culture that is moving away from Judeo-Christian values toward more pagan or secular-humanistic thinking. As a result, we increasingly are finding society intolerant of our beliefs, pressuring us to change our thinking and standards of behavior.
 - We also have numerous cults on the edges of Christianity, the members of which are religious but not saved believers, offering their own distorted gospels. Some deny the divinity of Christ; some deny he accomplished anything on the cross; some say salvation is by faith plus works; some ask you to reject the apostolic gospels in the New Testament to instead believe in fourth century gnostic gospels.
 - And even in churches with Christ's gospel and true believers, there are some who push a very similar form of legalism as plagued the churches of the late first century. So this letter should be able to help us cope with the antagonists in our society.
- † **[13: commands]** What is our next step in studying? We read the letter again, this time highlighting all the commands. Sometimes there are many! So I make a list on paper or in a spreadsheet, and then try to organize the commands by relationship. For example, there might be several commands

that tell us how to relate to each other in the church, so we put those together. Even within each relationship group, there might be more than one theme, so we can make subgroups.

- For example, in Philippians there are multiple commands about looking out for each other's interests and regarding others as more important than ourselves, of pursuing humble, obedient, sacrificial service [2.3-8]. So we group these together under the relationship "each other."
- But there also are several commands about having unity in the church for the gospel mission, of not grumbling or disputing with each other [1.27; 2.2-3, 14; 4.2, 5]. These also speak to our relationship with each other, so we could make two groups of commands about how we relate to each other in the church; or if you think one is primary or they both are similar, you can combine them into one group.
- We also find commands about how we should respond to the antagonists and to our spiritual leaders, how we should live in relationship with God, and what we should do for non-believers.

† **[14: negative]** As I organize the commands, I make special note of any commands that are negative. Why would the author use negative phrasing when he mostly uses positive? It is possible that he is countering what the antagonists have said.

- For example, suppose after I retire in a couple of months, I mean years, suppose I wrote y'all a letter from my beach condo. Maybe I have heard that everyone in the church has doubled their giving and now you as a body are not sure what to do with all that money.
- I might write and suggest to you that you support those who want to go to seminary to further their ministry skills, that you replace the leaky windows throughout the building, and that you hire more staff to expand the ministry's capacity.
- But what if I wrote, "Don't put the money in the bank, safe for a rainy day, for that shows a lack of faith in God's provision and an unwillingness to put his resources to work for the gospel." Why would I put that in my letter? There must be some reason I think this is a consideration, so I am trying to counter it.
- **[15: antagonist commands]** By that logic, when I am studying, I list any negative commands in the letter in their own column, as possibly countering antagonist commands.
- This technique suggests the antagonists were encouraging the Philippians to argue amongst themselves [2.14], as they became intimidated by the antagonists who were applying pressure [1.28] to the point that the Philippians would be anxious about their relationships with God [4.6], enough to abandon [oppose] Paul's gospel [3.18]. This gives us a better vision of what the problem was which Paul wanted to address.

† **[16: bad theology]** Now it is time to read the letter again. I know this sounds like a lot of work, but really it isn't for a letter like Philippians, which is only four pages long. You could do one step of this process each day in your quiet time, and you would have it all done in one week.

- This time as we read the letter, we look for theological statements. If you have been highlighting, this usually is whatever is left un-highlighted, though there can be some overlap.
- Again I organize these statements by topic, one group of statements about Christ, another about salvation, and so on. And again I look for any negative arguments as clues to the antagonist's theology.

- The main thrust of the antagonists seems to be that righteousness is earned by obedience [3.2-13]. Another key for them is that life and deliverance is about worldly success [3.2, 19], and thus Paul's imprisonment is shameful and evidence that God has abandoned him [1.12, 20].
 - **[17: good theology]** It would take me ten minutes to explain all of Paul's theology in this letter! Oh there is so much treasure for us in this little letter!
 - Let me say that Paul does counter the antagonists. True righteousness is accounted [imputed] to us by God as a gift of grace through our faith in Christ, not by anything earthly, not even by obedience to the Law [1.1, 9-11; 3.7-11].
 - And deliverance into eternal life, and even deliverance in our experiential sense, does not mean we will not suffer; in fact our hard circumstances – like Paul's imprisonment – might even be part of God's plan for spreading the gospel [1.12-14].
 - Paul also teaches us a lot about Christ, so we can grow to be like him and can follow him; and Paul reveals more about experiential righteousness, [that is] about growing to be truly righteous in life as we are already in God's eyes.
 - In this little four page letter, we get some of the clearest teaching about salvation and God's gift of righteousness, about experiential righteousness and the process of sanctification [spiritual growth], about the identity and nature of Christ, and about the purpose and expectations for life itself! I hope you are getting more eager to study this book! It has so much to offer us!
- † **[18: sources]** As I organize the theology of the letter, I also look for clues as to the sources of the author's theology and the antagonist's theology.
- For example, Paul quotes Isaiah in Philippians 2.10, so I know he is drawing on the Old Testament as a source. He refers repeatedly to Christ's gospel, so that also is a source [1.5, 7, 12, 16, 27; 2.22; 3.9-11; 4.3, 15].
 - The antagonists are influenced, best I can tell, by the flesh [2.3-4, 14-15; 3.2-3, 19], by the Mosaic Law [3.2-4, 9]; and by evil or sin [2.14-15; 3.2, 18-19].
 - So we have our classic biblical conflict: good vs. evil; also, top line living by faith and obedience in God's revelation vs. bottom line living under the influence of the flesh, the world, and evil. As we study the letter, we will use our top-line / bottom-line tool to help us see these distinctions, so we can make better choices in our lives and better discern God's voice in life situations.

Overview of the Letter

- † **[19: chart]** So I have made notes about the identities of the players, their theology, and their commands or actions that derive from their theology. I take all these notes and I make a diagram that summarizes what is happening, so I have a visual short-cut to go with my written notes. This is how I learned to study an epistle when I was in seminary. Dr. Charles Baylis taught me this; he is a Bible study genius. I have given you a handout to help you do this yourself and a devotion for reflection about the scripture.
- I encourage you to spend some time with them this week. God will reward your efforts to study his word, and in this case, he will help you learn how to use this technique for epistles, and grow you in skills and knowledge.

- The last step is to summarize in a paragraph or two what I think is happening. We might say something like this... The Philippians faced Gentile persecution and their mentor, Paul, was in prison. The legalists were pressuring them to see this suffering as evidence of God's displeasure because they were not following the Mosaic Law. Some in the church began to doubt their course of following Paul and of supporting and living by his gospel, which created disunity in the church. Paul wrote to correct their theological errors and point the way to righteous living.
- † **[20: external problem]** That would be my short summary for my notes. Let me give you a slightly expanded version since we are experiencing a sermon here. We want to have this in depth understanding of the letter, to inform us as we seek to understand each part of it in the coming weeks. This is what we get when making notes from the whole letter.
- Because Paul founded their church and led many of them to Christ, the Philippians had supported Paul and partnered with him in the gospel mission. Now, they were suffering persecution and Paul was in prison; they were experiencing pressure from local pagan Gentiles to abandon the Christian way of life, and pressure from Jews with a different gospel to see suffering as evidence of God's curse because they were not living by the Jewish Law.
 - **[21: internal problem]** These pressures were causing rifts within the church. People started to wonder if God was angry at them, judging them for having false theology. They saw Paul's suffering as possible evidence that God was judging him too. Some of them began to doubt Paul's message of imputed righteousness and to consider the message of the Jewish legalists that righteousness was earned through obedience to the Law of Israel. Thus some of them questioned whether they could continue supporting Paul.
 - **[22: Paul's response]** Paul wrote to counter the influence of both groups of antagonists. He said the Judaizing antagonists preached a false gospel out of a false theology that is fleshly, evil, and legalistic. The Philippians should be aware of what they say, but not intimidated by them. Instead, they should continue to hold fast to the true gospel, seek to live up to the righteousness they have been granted, and continue to encourage others to embrace Christ's gospel.
 - **[23: key theology]** Paul says true deliverance is through the gospel: deliverance from death, sin, and judgment, and deliverance into life, intimacy with Christ, and grace righteousness with growing experiential righteousness. He encouraged them to see that suffering did not negate their deliverance and they could rejoice in this deliverance regardless of their present suffering.
- † **[24: river]** Now that you understand the big picture, you are ready to read through the letter again, looking at each verse and seeing how Paul builds his argument to make his main points, and how each piece of the letter fits into that whole.
- † I hope you will be excited to see what God reveals to us in the coming weeks! Each week, I will explain a short passage in which God and the human authors make a strong point, and then we will relate it to the overall letter. I really think this is going to be a beneficial study for us. I hope you will make it a priority to be here each week, and that you will give the devotional exercises a try.
- † Let's pray . . .