

Making Christ Known: A Supreme Ambition (Phil 1:12-30)

Matthew Williams

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One of the striking things about political convictions is the way they cause two groups of people to have drastically different assessments of the same situation. I experienced as much as a pastor firsthand after the 2017 presidential election. Some members of our church came to me filled with grief and anger. How on earth could such a terrible thing happen to our country? Other members of our church came to me filled with gratitude and joy. It's about time something good happened to our country!

Same situation. Vastly different interpretations. Vastly different emotions. Why? Because each of the groups of people brought a different set of desires to the table on election night. The former desired a democratic candidate to win. The latter desired a republican candidate to win.

Our desires, the things we want, are the lens through which we evaluate our circumstances. It's part of being human, one of the ways we image the character of our Creator. We cannot separate our evaluation of the past, present, or future, from our desires. It's true in every area of life, not just politics.

The book of Philippians says a lot about our spiritual desires. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Philippi while imprisoned in Rome around AD 62 because he wouldn't stop telling people about Jesus. He's experiencing significant suffering. Yet when he evaluates his life, the primary thing he sees isn't suffering or deprivation. And the primary emotion he feels isn't sadness or anger.

What does he see? He sees how God is using even his suffering to show the world just how great and good and glorious Jesus is! So what does he feel? He feels joy. What kind of guys rejoices in suffering? A man who doesn't desire what most people desire.

Paul is man who loves Jesus. He doesn't have a bunch of equally strong desires in his heart. He's consumed with a singular passion – the honor of Christ. **When the exaltation of Christ is the supreme ambition of your life, he becomes the lens through which you evaluate every situation.** That's why Paul doesn't perceive or emotionally respond to his circumstances the way the world does.

His personal testimony to that effect in Phil 1:12-30 confronts us with three critical questions: (1) Is Christ the center of your evaluation? (2) Is Christ the focus of your desires? (3) Is Christ the aim of your life? Let's briefly consider each one as we work through the passage.

1) IS CHRIST THE CENTER OF YOUR EVALUATION? (vv. 12-18)

The Philippians already know what's happened to Paul. They know he's in prison. So Paul doesn't rehearse the details of how he got there or how hard it is. He jumps right into what he sees God doing through his imprisonment. V. 12, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel..."

Before we think about how the gospel is connected to Paul's imprisonment, notice how Paul speaks of the gospel itself. The good news of Jesus and all he has done to accomplish salvation for mankind is not a religious idea. It's a spiritual force, a divine power that was on the move in 62 AD and is still on the move today, advancing into new territory. And there are two ways Paul's imprisonment served to advance the gospel.

First, the "imperial guard," the elite unit of Roman soldiers responsible for prisoners like Paul, all learned why he was in jail. V. 13, "It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard that my imprisonment is for Christ." Undoubtedly most of them had never heard of Jesus before Paul showed up. But as they took turns guarding Paul, it gave him an opportunity to explain the reason he was in jail. He told them about a man named Jesus who changed his life.

Second, v. 14, "Most of the brothers (Christians in the Roman church) having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear." You might think Paul's suffering would intimidate them into silence. "I'm not throwing my lot in with this Jesus! That sounds like a great way to get arrested." But the exact opposite happened. The Roman Christians looked at Paul, they observed his suffering, and decided, "If he's willing to lay down his life for Jesus, then maybe Jesus is worth it. Maybe I should be willing to lay down my life too."

So they started speaking up, compelled by love for Paul and the Savior he proclaimed. They trusted the Lord that Paul's imprisonment, not to mention the potential of their own, wasn't a sign that something had gone terribly wrong. Rather, in the perfect sovereignty of his will, God had placed Paul in that prison, at that time, with those soldiers, for the sake of defending the gospel.

But there was a second group in Rome who were emboldened by Paul's imprisonment for very different reasons. In vv. 15-17, Paul tells the Philippians that some preachers relished his jail time as an opportunity to expand their own following. They were preaching from rivalry and envy, not sincerely, thinking to afflict Paul and convince some of his sheep to cross over into their own fold.

How easy it would have been for Paul to give in to self-pity, to feel sorry for himself, to muse on the injustice of it all, or for his first thought every morning to be, "I'm stuck here because someone in the judicial department is being a you-know-what." Yet that's not at all his emotional response. He's not ignorant or unaffected by their attitudes and actions. He doesn't have his head in the sand, so to speak. But neither his physical condition nor how other people are treating him are the center of his evaluation. Christ is!

As a result, not only is he not discouraged. He's rejoicing! V. 18, "In every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice." The gospel is advancing, and in that I rejoice! More people are hearing about Jesus, and in that I rejoice! Be honest, friend. When you evaluate your life, is your personal comfort the yardstick you use to distinguish the good from bad, or is it the advance of the gospel? Only when Christ is at the center of our evaluation will we have eyes to perceive and rejoice in what we might otherwise overlook as inconsequential or consolation prize expressions of God's grace.

The most joyful Christians I know are men and women who excel at playing a biblical version of "I spy." They have a finely tuned radar for spotting evidence of God's work, signs of the gospel advancing, all around them. It's not about looking on the bright side or playing the optimist. It's about perceiving reality. Paul sees what is actually true about his circumstances because he's focused on how God is at work in the midst of his circumstances. And what he sees as a result fills his heart with joy.

2) IS CHRIST THE FOCUS OF YOUR DESIRES? (vv. 19-26)

Paul says something downright stunning in vv. 19. “For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus this will turn out for my deliverance...” What does “deliverance” look like in his mind? If I was imprisoned, I would say that ten times out of ten, “deliverance” means being released! Getting out of jail! But that’s not how Paul defines deliverance. V. 20, “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 death.”

There are two possible outcomes in his mind – shame or deliverance. And notice neither one has anything to do with whether he is kept in prison or released from prison! Whether he will be ashamed or delivered has everything to do with whether Jesus is glorified through his life. The ultimate shame, the ultimate wasted life, in Paul’s view, is a life that fails to bring honor to Jesus. And the ultimate deliverance, the ultimate vindication, in Paul’s view, is a life that succeeds in bringing honor to Jesus.

Sometimes we think of the whole “God being glorified” thing as a sort of unstoppable, cosmic train that’s chugging along way out in space somewhere. It’s not really connected to our personal or physical lives, which is why it only comforts super Christians who have the emotional bandwidth to care about that sort of thing. That’s not a biblical perspective because that’s not what Paul says in v. 20.

The deliverance he anticipates could not be more personal or physical. Whether his present suffering ends in life (personal, physical release from prison) or death (personal, physical execution in prison), Paul knows he will be delivered! Why? Because he believes God will enable him, through the Philippians’ prayers and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, to honor Jesus “whether by life or death.”

Paul doesn’t define deliverance the way the world does because he doesn’t desire what the world does. His greatest desire, his supreme ambition, runs infinitely deeper than staying healthy, avoiding suffering, and securing a comfortable retirement. It’s a desire that comes pouring out of his heart in v. 21 in some of the most vivid and arresting language in the entire book.

He literally says: “For to me, to live – Christ, and to die – gain.” When I consider my life, Philippians, that’s what it’s all about. It’s all about Christ. Jesus isn’t one more

thing in my busy schedule. He's the one everything orients around and is connected to because he's the focus of my desires. My desire for him is stronger than every other desire.

Could you say the same? What establishes your identity, rules your affections, or defines your purpose? What does it mean to live in the fullest sense? There's only one life-giving answer for a Christian. It's Jesus - knowing Jesus, serving Jesus, and being with Jesus. Because he's worth it.

The focus of Paul's desire wasn't Christ plus work, or Christ plus health, or Christ plus recognition, or Christ plus justice, or Christ plus the kids, or Christ plus or any of the thousands of other good things we may rightly want and pray for in this life. It was simply Christ. It was Jesus that made life worth living in Paul's eyes. Nothing more and nothing less. It was the promise of being with Jesus that made death worth dying.

For all who hold fast to Christ in obedient faith, death is immeasurably more than an escape from the sorrows of this life. means going home to heaven, to where Jesus is, seated at the right hand of the Father. It's not primarily a sorrow, pain, a grief, or a loss. It's gain. It's victory. It's a win in the greatest way imaginable.

Paul literally says in v. 23, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is much, more, better!" As if there are not enough comparative adjectives in the Greek language to capture the immeasurably greater good of getting to be with Jesus! And yet that immeasurably greater good doesn't make him despondent at the thoughts of living in a broken world riddled with injustice. V. 22, for "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me!"

We love to share our passions, don't we? It's what happens when you get a foodie talking about their favorite restaurant or an engaged man talking about his fiancée. That's one of my favorites. They always say something like, "Oh man, where do I start? She's AMAZING." Paul's love for Jesus caused him to love what Jesus loves. It caused him to love Christ's bride, the people of God, and to spend himself helping churches like the Philippians love the Savior he loved.

V. 25, "Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus..." His sights were set so much higher than paying the bills, or raising

decent kids, or getting a week at the beach. Having tasted and seen that the Lord is good, he wanted nothing more than for Jesus to receive the honor, love, and obedience he deserves. Helping people like them enjoy a growing relationship with God was the goal of his life – not because it was his job as a pastor, but because Christ was the focus of his desires.

Could you say the same, Christian? Is there a person or group of people in the church you can point to and humbly say, “Here’s how I’m praying for them. Here’s how I’m serving them. Here’s how I’m encouraging them in the Lord.” I’m not saying you will do everything God called Paul to do. I’m saying if Christ is the focus of your desires, his body will be the recipient of your spiritual labor. You will not be content to attend a Sunday service. Even if you are a natural introvert, you will be compelled to love God’s people relationally.

3) IS CHRIST THE AIM OF YOUR LIFE? (vv. 27-30)

In vv. 27-30, Paul summarizes what “progress and joy in the faith” practically look like. Here’s what it means to make much of Jesus. If Christ is the focus of your desires, here’s how you will live. Here’s how you will help other people live. It looks like living a life that is shaped in every aspect by the gospel – by the good news of who Jesus is and what he did for us on the cross.

Look at v. 27. “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...” Paul has no category for someone who says, “Oh yeah, I love Jesus,” but their life is no different than the world. Hear that loud and clear if you’ve steered clear of Christianity because of Christian hypocrisy. God takes it even more seriously than you do. A genuine, Christian life, by definition, is a gospel-centered life in the sense that Christ and him crucified makes a necessary and authoritative claim, a tangible difference, on the way we do every aspect of life – work, sexuality, finances, friendships, hospitality, entertainment, you name it.

The imperative Paul uses in v. 27 has strong political undertones. It means to live as a citizen worthy of the gospel of Christ. As a Roman colony with citizenship privileges, it’s Paul’s way of reminding them and us that living a gospel-centered life starts with remembering Christians are not citizens of the kingdom of this world. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Our primary loyalty isn’t to Caesar. It’s to King Jesus. So here’s what loyalty to the King who laid down his life for us requires.

First, it means “standing firm,” keeping our feet firmly planted in the truth of God’s Word. Second, it means living in unity, with “one spirit” and “one mind.” That doesn’t mean we agree on every matter of secondary importance. That does mean we pursue peace in our friendships and marriages, even when it’s the last thing we feel like doing, and take conversational initiative to cross ethnic barriers so the church isn’t divided by the color of our skin.

Third, it means “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,” persevering in the hard and messy labor of helping one another fight for holiness and walk in love and good works. That means we don’t wait for opportunities to make Christ known or for a non-Christian to randomly show up on a Sunday morning. We pursue relationship with our neighbors, serving and caring for the community the Lord has placed us in, connecting them with our Christian friends, and explaining the difference Jesus makes in our life.

Fourth, it means living with courage in the face of cultural opposition. It takes courage to obey God’s Word and not live the way everyone around you is living. It takes courage to speak up for the goodness of God’s authority when self-autonomy is all the rage. It takes courage to be compassionately explain what Scripture teaches about sexuality and gender at the risk of being misunderstood or hated. When we (v. 28) are “not frightened in anything” our bravery becomes a powerful testimony to our trust in the Lord and his faithfulness to vindicate his people.

Finally, living a life worthy of the gospel means joining Paul, and the Philippians, in suffering for Jesus’ sake. Look at v. 29. “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake...” Friend, if you purpose to make Christ the aim of your life. If you resolve to spend and be spent for the sake of helping other people know and follow him because you know he’s worth it, it will not be easy. That choice will come at a cost.

It will cost you money. It will cost you time. It will cost you relationships. It will require making decisions that prioritize his renown and his people over your own comfort. It may even cost you your physical health. Such is the life our Lord has “granted” us. We shouldn’t be surprised. We follow a Suffering Servant. And this we know. No suffering “for the sake of Christ” is ever wasted. It’s not purposeless. It’s not fruitless. It does not mean you missed his “real” calling for your life or you’re

doing something wrong. It means your life has become a testimony to the infinite worth of Christ.

For what are those lesser glories, my friends, in comparison to Him? What is the moon in comparison to the Sun? What are the created things in comparison to the Creator? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:36).

CONCLUSION

As we begin our new series, and especially as we prepare for our 6th annual International Missions Weekend in March, ponder these questions from Phil 1. (1) Is Christ your supreme ambition the way he is for Paul? (2) Does your evaluation and emotional response to your present circumstances confirm your answer? (3) Where do you need to grow in living a life worthy of Christ? May he be the center of our evaluation, KingsWay, the focus of our desires, and the aim of our life. Let's pray and ask for the Spirit's help.