
MAKING MUCH OF JESUS:
LIVING A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

STUDY NOTES FOR CARE GROUPS – (PHILIPPIANS 1:18B-30)

The following are resource questions that you can use with your Care Group for discussion. They are based on the sermon preached on Sunday, January 17, 2010 by Oliver Chia at the Grace Baptist Church, Singapore. The sermon is available online at <http://www.gracebap.org.sg/worship/series.html>.

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Context: There is some degree of division or conflict in the Philippian church. Paul will deal with this later, but he paves the way by showing his own attitude to Christians who oppose him. If he, in prison, can rejoice even over his detractors, the Philippians can surely deal charitably in their disagreements. Paul can take such a line because he has his eye on a much bigger picture – his calling and commission is to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and opposition can be tolerated if it leads to the furtherance of the primary goal.

This is not an approach in our modern way of thinking. We live in an age of individualism, with a shopping-cart mentality to spirituality. We will make our way round churches looking for what seems to fit our needs and moving on when it does not. We find it difficult to see ourselves as part of a larger plan or working to a goal that is not on our own initial agenda.

In the midst of rivalry and opposition, why is it that Paul is able to persevere in the work of ministry and with real joy? How do we live our Christian life?

I. MAKING MUCH OF JESUS (VV. 18B-26)

Paul's certainty that he will speak boldly (v.20), and will not make a poor and shameful presentation of the gospel, is not based on his confidence in his skill as a preacher but on the ability of God to see the task through.

A. Christ honored through life and death (vv. 18b-20)

Paul is not a mere puppet in the process, though, because it is Paul's own person (literally, 'body') that God will act to exalt Christ. God is able to work only in so far as Paul is willing to let Him work and to be the agent through whom the Spirit will speak.

Paul uses the word 'body' as the term for self (see Romans 12:1). He knows that serving God is a matter of action, of deeds and words, and of relationships with others – all of which are about our public, physical life, not about some sort of internal 'spirituality' which is divorced from everyday living.

....honours his Master (Jesus Christ); not himself.

B. Dying is gain; while living is fruitful labor for Christ (vv. 21-26)

Paul expects God to use him to exalt, or glorify, Jesus by his bold testimony (which is the cause of his imprisonment). For Paul, it is not enough to hope that opportunity will come in the future, nor is it enough to hark back to past times. The question is always, how can God be served here and now?

Seizing the moment can be dangerous in human terms. Paul is sure that he will not disgrace the gospel. He will speak boldly and make a stand for Jesus. And it may be the death of him. It won't matter though. If he lives, he will have made his testimony and will continue to serve God. If he dies, then he will demonstrate that the gospel gives hope even in the face of death, and that love for Christ is something to die for; if need be. Living or dying, he will be for Christ an effective witness (Greek martys, which gives us 'martyr').

- Paul's life is centered on Christ (v. 21)
Life is lived in the knowledge of the love of God embodied in Jesus Christ. Jesus is Paul's constant companion, the one he loves and serves, worships and strives to know more fully.

To die is gain. Gain of what? Of Christ. In death, Paul will enter into eternal life and be present with Christ Himself.

Viewed in that light, death is far from unappealing. To continue in this life will give Paul more opportunities for his task, and no doubt will bear fruit in terms of new converts and new churches.

.....Most of Paul's readers, then and today, would be hard pressed to agree with this stance. Death may well lead to eternal life, but this world is the one that is more real in our experience. The thought of leaving it fills us with trepidation and fear, both of the unknown and for those we leave behind. ...Paul sets an example in which Christ becomes ever more discernible, and the wonders of this world point to the glory of the next.

II. LIVING WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL (VV. 27-30)

Paul's indecision over whether he would prefer death with its gateway to the presence of Christ, or life with its continuing opportunity to serve God, raises a question to which there is no simple answer. This is a tension which is evident throughout many a believer's life. Yet in the end, such issue are secondary to the main reality of Paul's existence, that of knowing and serving Christ. As long as he was doing God's will and living his life for Christ, as long as his final destination was the presence of Christ, all other questions were of little importance. For Paul, there remains a single goal; a single binding reality, which is found in Christ. It is Christ who can bring unity to the fragmentation of life, whether in the first century or 21st century. In the light of Christ, work and rest, family and friendships find their place and are enhanced and given meaning.

- A. Partnership in the advancement of the Gospel (vv. 5, 12)
The Philippian believers are in danger of division, and there are definite problems between individuals and probably between the groups they represent. Paul's own example of sacrificial service is a reminder of the Christian love they should be showing. That kind of love that looks first of all to the needs of others, and is prepared to give way rather than force its own will. When Paul comes explicitly to deal with the Philippian problems, he will be doing so from an advantageous position: he not only preaches mutual love, but practices it.
- B. Unity in the Body (v.27)
Paul asserts that because the Philippian believers have been made citizens of heaven by the grace of God, they must now live up to what they have been given. Christians are called to live up to what they already have and living in this way is a mark of the work of the Holy Spirit, and as a sign of spiritual growth. The best form of witness for Christ is the visible effect of His presence in the life of the Church. So both for their own sakes, as growing Christians, and for the spread of the gospel, Paul wants to find the Philippians standing firm in their faith, and showing unity in the fellowship.

1. BASIS FOR THIS UNITY (EPH 2:14-16)
2. STRIVING FOR UNITY (PHIL. 2:1-4)
3. RESULT OF THIS UNITY
 - Withstanding persecution and hardship (Phil 1:28)
 - Presenting a credible witness to the world

.....Such unity is a witness, and a tool in the Christians' struggle for the advancement of the gospel. It is a struggle against a real opposition, which has brought them suffering. Indeed, it may bring death, which would explain why Paul stressed his own inner struggle about living and dying. He wants the Philippian believers to realize that whatever the world may throw at them, their relationship with Christ is what really counts. Those who had given their allegiance to Christ other than Caesar, would have been seen as subversive and possibly even rebellious. Such charges could carry extreme penalties. Even if imprisonment and execution were not in sight, social ostracism, loss of jobs or trade and public disapproval would have been an intimidating prospect. Against such opposition, the Philippian believers must present a united front and a common faith.

C. Suffering for the sake of the gospel (Phil 1:29-30)

The context of opposition leads Paul to speak in verse 30 of the struggle (a military or athletic image) that he and the Philippian believers share. The struggle, though, takes the positive form of proclaiming the gospel of salvation rather than a negative one of attacking their opponents.

As Paul will go on to show in the subsequent chapters, the pattern of death and resurrection that is found in Christ is the pattern also for Christ's followers. The way to eternal life lies through the cross. As citizens of God's kingdom in a fallen world, Christ's followers are strangers in a strange world. The values they are called to embrace pose a stiff challenge to the values of the world. Conflict is surely inevitable.

Moreover, the suffering of Christians on behalf of Christ (that is, in his service) is in some sense a sharing in the sufferings of Christ Himself. Those who are baptized into Christ are joined with Him in His death. That is not merely symbolic language. Just as union with Christ brings the certainty of resurrection, so it brings to the faithful disciple at least the likelihood of sharing the reality of suffering for the cause of the gospel. One may wonder whether a gospel that draws no fire truly offers and audible call to repentance and salvation.

Discussion:

The central idea in today's study is that *CHRISTIANS ARE CITIZENS OF HEAVEN AND OUR LIFE OUGHT TO REFLECT THAT.*

1. What pattern(s) in our lives today authenticate that belief? Can we see it? Can others see it?
2. If we are blessed with religious freedom and protection from the authority, what is our response to others who are suffering for Christ? What can we do besides praying and interceding for our brothers and sisters in Christ?
3. Are we able to pass on the same values (of heavenly citizens) to our future generations?

Prayer:

Lord, we find it hard to face the prospect of suffering for you. Give us such a vision of your love and your kingdom that is truly seen to be worth any price. Amen.