



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

A Manner Worthy of the Gospel
Philippians 1:12-14; 20-30

Beginning today and continuing for the next four Sundays, the sermons will be based on Paul's letter to the Philippians.

There are two things to keep in mind when studying Philippians: First, Paul was the founding pastor of the Philippian church, and he was dearly loved by the congregation. There were some in the church who remembered the day when Paul first walked into town sharing the gospel. He and his companions met a group of women at a place of prayer down by the river, and these were the first in town to recognize the truth of salvation in Jesus Christ. One of the women was Lydia, and she and her household were baptized. Most scholars believe that Lydia, a businesswoman, offered her home to the church for its worship and she was one of the leaders in the church.

The second thing to remember is that Paul wrote the letter to his friends in Philippi while he was in jail. He could have been incarcerated in Ephesus or Rome--no one knows for sure. But Paul had caused a ruckus in Jerusalem and his accusers were plotting to assassinate him, so being a Roman citizen, Paul appealed his case to Caesar, and to Caesar's court he was sent.

Knowing their pastor was in jail, the church in Philippi passed the hat to take up an offering to be sent to Paul to care of any of his needs. After receiving the offering, Paul wrote his friends a thank you note that we know as Philippians.

You have to admire Paul's compassion for this church and his zeal for Christ. He knew the church in Philippi was concerned about his welfare, but he let them know that his imprisonment was all in God's sovereign plan. Paul wrote, "Yes, I am in jail, but did you know that my imprisonment has allowed me to share Jesus with my guards?" Well, those were not his exact words, but he did write in Philippians 1:12-14:

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I

am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

I cannot help but wonder if the Roman guards dreaded the assignment of guarding Paul, or stood in line wanting for the opportunity to sit with Paul where they could hear more about Jesus. But whatever, Paul was delighted that he had shared Christ with all the guards, and he was encouraged that his brothers and sisters who were in contact with him were more confident in their witness.

Because Paul was in jail, the whole palace guard heard about salvation in Christ. And not only that, but in chapter four, Paul spoke of those in Caesar's household who were Christians. I would assume that Paul was referring to Claudius, but it could have been Nero.

As I read the text from Philippians, which is printed on the front page of the bulletin, notice that Paul did not know what would happen to him. He might have died in prison, or been executed, or set free, but notice his complete confidence in God's love and grace. Paul wrote:

²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

Paul lived in a dangerous world. He had been frequently imprisoned, flogged, five times received the 39 lashes, beaten with a rod, pelted with stones, and shipwrecked three times. He was constantly on the move and constantly in danger from rivers, bandits, enemies and false believers.

Enduring all the pain, and in constant danger, I think I can understand why he looked forward to departing this life and being with Christ. Yet, compelled to follow Jesus, he was very willing to continue in his service on earth, for it meant fruitful labor.

You certainly do not have to be told that the world is still a painful and dangerous place, and seems to be getting worse. I am unsure who in worship today is concerned about global warming, or even if you give it any credence, but these category 5 hurricanes that seem to keep forming over the warmer water of the oceans are pretty scary. Most every day when I turn on the news, there is something about North Korea going insane with a nuclear arsenal. There are bombs being planted in subways, trains and malls, and mass shootings in crowded places. The roads are filled with crazy drivers heading down the highway at 75 miles per hour and some of them are skillful enough to do this while texting on their phone. Monday afternoon I was weeding my garden without gloves. I thought it was just me and Sally and the mosquitos, when a coral snake crawled out of the weeds right where I was putting my bare hand. We are all getting older, our mortality is a reality, and I wonder if I have the courage that Paul wrote about.

I wonder if I can say, “Whether I live or whether I die, Christ will be exalted in my body.” Do I have the courage to live in a manner worthy of the gospel? Or for that matter, do I have the courage to die in a manner worthy of the gospel? How about you?

In the light of Paul’s exhortation, I wonder what it means to bring into living color a life lived in a manner worthy of the gospel. I think the text that Clarence read from Matthew gives us a hint. “The Kingdom of God is like...” and let me put it this way:

There he sat outside the terminal gate in a moment of desperation. Moments before he and about thirty other men pushed their way to the locked bars of the gate where the foreman would select the men he needed to work on the docks that day. When the foreman arrived he shouted, “I only need seven men, only seven.” Then he began pointing to the men who looked strong and would do an honest day’s work. The gate was unlocked and the seven selected workers walked through, thankful they would now be able to purchase food on their way home and maybe pay a little on the rent.

The other twenty-three men shook their heads, not knowing what to do next. All they knew is that their rent needed to be paid and their families fed. It was

particularly hard on this man, for he did not eat breakfast that morning so his kids could have a morsel before going to school.

None of his companions in unemployment wanted to go home. No one wanted to face their wives with the news that they could not find work. They just warmed themselves by the fire that they built in a barrel just outside the gates to the dock behind which the lucky ones were working. But about nine o'clock, the foreman approached the gate and yelled, "I need seven more men to work." Those who remained ran to the gate where the foreman chose seven more workers.

There was no one else hiring, so if you did not get a shift at the docks, you could not find work. Those who remained unemployed continued to warm themselves by the fire. And again at noon and again at 3:00 PM the foreman hired seven more men to work a short shift, for a three hour shift would at least provide a pot of broth for a family.

Now only two men sat outside the terminal gate. The desperation was intense, and when they tried to comfort each other, they spoke about their families and thus began the litany of what they faced if they did not get a job – hunger, cold nights with no heat, eviction, sending the kids off to the homes of relatives. It was more than they could bear. When the foreman showed up again at the gate and saw these two without work, he said, "Hey, I'm surprised you are still here, but if you want, I have about an hour's work for the two of you."

"Thanks. We will take anything we can get." The gate was unlocked and the final two who showed up to work that day were let in and put to work in a warehouse. When the whistle blew, the foreman had the thirty men he had hired that day line up, and he told the accountant to pay each one \$50. It did not matter if they had been working all day, or if they were one of those who only worked an hour, they were all paid for a full day's work.

Of course, those who worked all day complained, but they had to admit they were paid exactly what the foreman said he would pay them when they signed on.

I don't know about you, but I have always been bothered by what I have perceived as an injustice in the parable Jesus told about the Laborers in the Vineyard. Jesus should have known that if someone works twelve hours and another works for one hour and both did the same job, the one who worked twelve hours should be paid twelve times more. Jesus, why don't you do the math?

There are always those who will complain. There are those who feel cheated and unrecognized. If I had been hired in the first group, I too would have

felt cheated. You can hear in their words, “I don’t care whether or not those who only worked an hour can feed their families or pay the rent; they should not get as much as me.”

But the landowner, the one who gave the example of living in a manner worthy of the Gospel, understood the human need of all the men who wanted to work in his vineyard.

Do you hear in the parable the wonderful compassion of God? Those who worked all day were paid enough to feed their families, but if the landowner paid those who only worked one hour what they actually earned their families would have remained hungry, and the night would have been cold.

Do you hear the amazing generosity of God? Those who worked all day got what they deserved, but those who were hired later received much more than they deserved. But in the church we have a word for receiving blessings we do not deserve. We call it grace.

I know the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard bothers us hard-working, individualistic, Americans, but the point of the story is to teach the generosity and grace of God who give us all much more than we deserve.

And we are to be the landowner; we are to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ by always showing the love, grace and generosity of God.

I remember when I was a child and needed a Halloween costume, my mom dressed me up like a hobo. I did not know what a hobo was. My mom went to the box where she kept old clothes that would soon be turned into rags and found a flannel shirt with holes in the elbows of the sleeves. Then she took a faded pair of my older brother’s blue jeans that were threadbare in the knees, and because the pants were about two sizes too large she took a rope, and using it like a belt, tied the pants around my waist. She took a piece of charcoal and painted a beard on my hairless face. There was an old hat straw hat in the garage, and finally she took some rags and tied them into another linen cloth, then then tied it to a broom handle and put it over my shoulder.

Well, I was a hobo for Halloween, but had no idea what a hobo was, but I had seen cartoon characters that looked something like the hobo I was supposed to be.

I have not heard the word hobo in years, and maybe some of our younger members have never heard of hobos. Maybe it is just that I have a hard time

keeping up with proper politically correct language, and we are not supposed to use the word hobo any longer. I don't know.

No one really knows where the word came from, but there was a time back during the dust bowl and great depression when some people went wherever they could to find work. They were destitute, and could not care for their families. I picture men climbing into empty boxcars and traveling by train to a destination where it was rumored they could find work.

One morning when Fred was a child he got out of bed and went to the kitchen for breakfast. At the breakfast table was a hobo, who probably just got off the train a block away. Fred was scared of the man, and when he left, he asked his mother who he was. She said, "Well, his name is Henry, and he said he was hungry."

"Well, where did he come from?"

"He came down the railroad tracks."

"Mom, weren't you scared?"

She said, "He's hungry."

"Well, I was scared of him!"

"Well, he was hungry."

I read a story like that, and I recall the words of the Apostle Paul, "Whatever happens, always conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the Gospel."

This morning I cannot tell you how you are to respond to the events that are happening in our world. I do know that the world is still filled with refugees who have fled from places like Syria. I know that we cannot allow Kim Jun Un to put a nuclear warhead on a missile. Health care is still in the daily news, and I wonder if any Christian can be comfortable in a world where the poor suffer and the wealthy have the best care.

I am getting a little ahead of myself in preaching on Philippians, but in the very next chapter Paul wrote, **"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."**

Oh, how I appreciate those of you who give part of your life to mentor a child, especially those children whose only example of success is the man driving the Cadillac with two beautiful women hanging on him as he sells drugs in the

projects. That is their idea of a role model. That is the only success story they know.

I am not sure what we can do, but it starts by taking the focus off ourselves, our comforts, our desires and focus on the problems that face hurricane victims, those who suffer from curable diseases, or anyone who suffers and so many other people who live in poverty.

Consider some less dramatic issues: you are snubbed by a church member, someone you really do not like very much. What do you do? **Conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.** You have been cheated, what do you do? **Conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.** Your business begins to lose profits, what do you do? Cut a few corners? Drop the quality of your product? Cheat a little on your tax return? No one will know. No, you **conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.** I may have been rambling for some fifteen or twenty minutes today, but you only need to go away today with one thing: So will you say it with me? **Whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.**