
“Being Gospel Centered”
Philippians 1:12-18
Pastor Peter Yi
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(Philippians 1:12-18)

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the Gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴And 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.

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the Gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

A phrase that we use repeatedly is “Gospel-centered.” We say that our church should be Gospel-centered, a para-church ministry should be Gospel-centered. Our marriages should be Gospel-centered. In our singleness we should be Gospel-centered. When we go to work, we should be Gospel-centered. It’s definitely a phrase that has gotten a lot of traction in the evangelical world. It’s a phrase that’s become commonplace in our church as well. It’ll be difficult to listen to even one sermon at our church before you come across that phrase, but what does it mean? The word ‘centered’ is easy enough to understand. Just as our sun is at the center of our universe with all the planets orbiting around the sun, so our lives have the Gospel at the center, and all facets of our lives circle around the Gospel. Think of it like a bicycle wheel. There are basically three components. The hub, the spokes and the rim. The hub is the Gospel. The spokes which radiate from the hub are the various areas of our lives like family, dating, finances, work, and so on, which all meet up at the rim, which constitutes our living in this world, as the old adage goes, “where the rubber meets the road,” meaning where our Gospel centered faith lives itself out in the world. All three elements work together to make up a Gospel centered life. If you don’t have the hub—the Gospel—then you have no core, no center to hold you fast. And if you have no rim, then sadly, you don’t have an active faith that is lived out in all the different parts of your life. That’s why all three are needed.

So, we know what it means to be centered, but what is the Gospel? We can look at it a couple different ways and both are necessary.

First, the Gospel is an historical event. The Gospel is rooted in an event that occurred in real time, in a real place, and in a real person. 2000 years ago, sometime around AD30, in the ancient city of Jerusalem, a place that we all can visit ourselves, a god-man named Jesus, died on a Roman cross, next to two thieves. He was buried in a known tomb. Then three days later he rose again for our sins. That historical event is the Gospel. Here’s how Paul himself, defines the Gospel.

(1Corinthians 15:3) For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Second, the Gospel is theological truth. The first part is *that* it happened, in history, in time, and in space. The second part is *why* it happened. What was the purpose for the event? Paul says two times the words, “according to the Scriptures” which refers to the Old Testament Scriptures. This means that Jesus died and rose to accomplish God’s plans that were determined way before the actual event occurred. But there’s another really important phrase in this passage that tells us of the purpose. Paul writes, “Christ died **for our sins.**” In those three words, we go from history to theology. If Paul just said, “Christ died” he would be merely explaining an historical event. But when he adds the words, ‘for our sins,’ then he tells us purpose, he tells us theology.

What then is the Gospel? The Gospel is the real historical event where Jesus, the god-man, came to this earth, was born of a virgin, lived a perfect sinless life, died on a cross, and rose again from the dead, to save us from our sins. That’s the Gospel. That’s the hub around which our whole life is connected and spins. That’s what it means to live a Gospel-centered life. Today’s passage gives us a deeper insight into what that means. Let’s take a look.

First, a Gospel-centered life looks at trials as just another means to advancing the Gospel. We all know that trials, especially really difficult trials can either derail us, cause our lives to spin out of control, OR it can strengthen our resolve. A severe trial rarely leaves us the same.

As we know, the Apostle Paul was arrested because of the Gospel. It wasn’t for some other crime or infraction, but it was directly related to his ministry in the Gospel that he was put in prison. His passionate and unrelenting work in sharing, preaching, and expanding the work of the Gospel, resulted in him making many enemies, just like it did for Jesus. It was under these false accusations that Paul was imprisoned. Now, we might think that that would be the end of the road, the end of an effective ministry. But that was not the case. Paul says, to the contrary, the Gospel is actually advancing. It was making inroads to a group of people in prison, to which he otherwise would not have had access.

The very first ministry other than a church that I ever supported was a ministry called Prison Fellowship. This was a ministry founded by Charles Colson. Colson was part of President Richard Nixon’s cabinet and was known as the hatchet man. He was dirty and did the so-called dirty work for the administration. In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, Colson became sort of the scapegoat and landed in prison. Just before he went to prison, as his life was falling apart, he heard the Gospel from a close friend, after which he went to his car, and as he sat behind the wheel, he started to weep uncontrollably as he came under the conviction of sin, and then trusted in Jesus as his Saviour. And off to prison he went. Once he got out, he left the world of politics and started Prison Fellowship, which brought the Gospel to penal institutions, first in America, and then internationally. Who knew that this terrible trial in Colson’s life would lead to this incredible ministry.

Prison is a realm that all of us would think is an unreachable place. But God put Paul there so that the Gospel could be shared to those within the prison system—the prisoners and the guards.

A few years ago, a Korean-American pastor was imprisoned in North Korea for a couple years. I forget his name, but after he was released and returned to the States, he shared quite openly about his time there. One of the things he shared was that he started to build a relationship with the guards who were assigned to him. They knew he was a Christian, and a pastor, and they started to engage him with some conversation and then some questions. The guards started sharing with him about their marital issues, and he was able to give Christian wisdom to them. I don't know if had the chance to explicitly share the Gospel, but he was able to do at least that.

Another friend of mine was recently hospitalized. As we reached out to him, of course we were not allowed to visit him because of all the COVID restrictions, but his response was just incredible. His hospitalization resulted in him sharing Christ with the hospital staff and other patients. Where are you right now? What trial are you experiencing right now? Could it be that God might be giving you the chance to proclaim Jesus? You see, that's how we should view our trials and challenging circumstances. The silver lining to our trials is that it often produces a unique Gospel sharing opportunity.

However, there's another thing that happens. When we hear about the bold, faithful example of other Christians, it emboldens us in our faith. Look with me to verse 14. Paul writes, "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."

Paul's imprisonment for the Gospel emboldened the Christians to proclaim the Gospel without fear. The boldness that they displayed ultimately came from the Lord. The verse says they became confident in the Lord. And that's where our confidence comes from. Jesus, by his Holy Spirit, emboldens us and gives us courage to speak the Gospel. But at the same time, the boldness of others, especially those in more difficult circumstances, inspires the same boldness in other Christians.

We know however, that persecution of one Christian or a group of Christians could have the opposite effect. When one of ours is attacked, we can go into retreat. We say, "Oh, be careful. You'll end up like Paul. Better to just keep your mouth shut. That's why we should just quietly live out our faith." That has happened throughout history and still occurs today. Yet, when Scripture mentions the suffering and the persecution of the saints, it's never intended to make us retreat. In every instance, it's a call to action. When we ourselves are persecuted, we are told to pray for our enemies. We are to love them. We go the extra mile with them. As well, when we hear of bold Christians, we are shamed that we are so cowardly and a stronger courage begins to stir within us.

There's a saying from the early centuries of the church. It goes like this. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." That was one of the tag lines that inspired early Christians to continue to be bold despite persecution. As well, one of the most popular Christian books during the time of the Reformation was written by John Foxe's called, "Foxe's Book of Martyrs." As a historian he compiled a massive collection of Christian martyrs beginning with Stephen in Acts 7, all the martyrs that died under the Roman emperors Nero, Domitian, and up to the 15th century. You need to understand that in the time after the Reformation, for Christians, there were basically just three books available to them. First of course was the Bible, then there was Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, and finally Foxe's Book of Martyrs. That was "The Purpose Driven Life" of the 16th century. That was the 16th century version of "Your Best Life Now."

Why write such a morbid book on being eaten by lions and burned at the stake? Because they are all stories of incredible courage and devotion to Jesus. Those stories serve to inspire us to live boldly and courageously live, and if necessary, to suffer for our Saviour.

Don't sell short even your own suffering and trials. It can and just may inspire others, especially within our own church community. That's what a Gospel-centered life looks like. It approaches trials in a new light.

Here's the second thing that a Gospel-centered life is like. **A Gospel-centered life cares only that the Gospel is preached.** As mature as the Philippian church was, there might have been a division lurking in their midst. Perhaps Paul's absence allowed this division to take on a more visible and noticeable form. Here's how Paul describes these two camps. First, it's important to observe that they were not preaching two different Gospel. He doesn't say anything negative about the actual Gospel they were preaching, as he did in his letter to the Galatians. We know from that letter how seriously Paul took, any modification of the Gospel. Let me share what he said.

(Galatians 1:6) I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different Gospel— ⁷ which is really no Gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a Gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a Gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

For us today there are many false Gospels. The Gospel of the cults, that deny the deity of Jesus. There's always the Gospel of works, that says you have to fix a part of yourself before you can come. There's the opposite to that which says that you can come as you are AND remain as you are. There's no need for sanctification, no need to forsake your sins. And another popular false Gospel today is the prosperity Gospel, which Paul mentioned to Timothy. It's those that think the godliness is a means to financial gain. These are all false Gospels. But this group in the Philippian church, strangely enough, were not preaching a different Gospel. In other words, their doctrine was spot on. It was orthodox. What then was the issue? It was a matter of the heart.

The first group...we'll call them the bad group. Paul says that they preach out of envy and rivalry. The Bible teaches us that envy and rivalry often live together, like salt and pepper. They are works of the flesh, of our sinful nature. What exactly does it mean to preach out of envy and rivalry? It's preaching born out of a divisive, un-unified heart, and its goal is to create more disunity. It's meant to create factions, meaning it's meant to create followers of the preacher, more than followers of Christ. That occurred in the Corinthian church. They were saying, I follow Apollos, I follow Paul (1 Cor 3:4ff). These preachers were motivated by selfish ambition. Selfish ambition is a political word. When we say, "They're playing politics" whether in the workplace or even in the church, we know that there are ulterior motives at play; there's maneuvering, there are personal agendas. The best intentions are not in mind. That's the word that's being used to describe what's going on. Their motivation is to stir up trouble for Paul.

Why would they do that? What motivations are behind that? Well, perhaps they felt they didn't share the same ability as Paul did. They felt inferior. Perhaps they wanted their own following. They wanted to get people in their camp, on their side. They may have wanted the spotlight. All these things often lie at the heart of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. What's clear is that the Gospel ministry had taken second place, and the individual's personal agenda had taken priority.

There's a warning here for Christian leaders. We have to guard our hearts from these impure motives. All leaders are susceptible to these evil intentions. In prayer, we have to repent of those things, and always place the Gospel at the very center of our lives. I've heard this example stated several times. Churches and pastors pray for spiritual revival and what they often times mean in that prayer is the qualification, and let it begin at my church. Oh, if it began with my church, what a blessing that would be, but what if God indeed sent revival, but he sent it to the church on the other side of town. Would you still rejoice? That's one way we can tell if we are self-centered or Gospel-centered. So Christian leaders need to be careful, not to boast in anything, not in their influence, or their education, or their ability, or the size of their church, but only in Christ. We must keep our motives pure.

However, there's also an instruction for the congregation. Be discerning of preachers with impure motives—preachers that seem to speak more of themselves than of God. *A couple years ago, a pretty prominent pastor came out publicly to say that he's no longer a Christian, he's leaving his wife, leaving his church, and leaving the faith. It shocked the evangelical world. A close friend of mine co-pastors in another church in that same denomination, so I asked him if he had any extra insight into what had happened to that pastor. Here's what he said. "Peter, I don't know any more than what everyone else knows, but here's something you might find insightful. Some years ago, my son and I visited his church where he was preaching, and my son is not a believer. After the service, I asked my son what he thought of the message and he said something like this. "It seems like that pastor really likes to promote himself," or something to that effect."* The church member must be very careful to be as discerning as they can be, not in some sort of witch hunt, but after a while, you get a sense about the leader. How does that occur? What happens is this. In one way or another, whatever is in our hearts or the preacher's heart begins to seep out. Our true motives, ambitions and desires begin to leak, often times without us even knowing it. I'm sure we've all been guilty of that. A little criticism here, a little self-promotion, a little disagreement. Putting down someone else to make ourselves look better, and so on. So, let's be discerning.

Now, let's look at the second group. We'll call them the good group. They preach the same unadulterated Gospel as the bad group, but their motives are completely opposite. They preach out of goodwill, out of love, and with sincerity, with pure motives. There is no self-interest in this group. They care only to preach the Gospel; they care that they remain faithful to Paul; they care that the church remains united and not divided. Even though Paul was absent, they weren't vying for his vacant position, their goal remained the same. They were not merely committed to Gospel ministry as they had always been, but the text says that they became even more committed, more emboldened for the work of the Gospel. This is what characterizes pure motives.

One commentator made a very important point between the two groups. “The good group was motivated by knowing. They knew Paul’s imprisonment was the result of God’s appointment, in order to defend the Gospel. Their knowledge was true. However, the bad group, their motivation was not by knowing, but by **supposing** that Paul’s imprisonment gave them a way to cause him trouble. Their supposition was false.” (Hansen).

I think this is an important observation to think about. Often times, I find that people who act from facts and knowing are different from people who act from supposing. When a person knows the facts, the true facts, he moves forward with conviction and confidence. He’s not swayed even in the face of opposition, but the one who works from a place of supposing, of speculating, they will often resort to ad hominem attacks, character assaults upon those in the opposition. We can all fall into that kind of trap, so we should be very careful to know the facts, the truth, and to check our motives.

Now, look at what Paul says next, which is truly remarkable. He says,
¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

He just went out of his way to make a distinction between good motives and bad motives as it relates to Gospel ministry. But now he says that in the final analysis, what really matters is that Christ is preached, regardless of the motives. Is Paul saying that the motives don’t matter? No, I don’t think we can reach that conclusion. The reason is because Paul does make a distinction between good and bad motives, of course with the intention of communicating that having good motives is a thousand times better than having bad motives. So, what can we learn from this last statement?

We can learn that there is a hierarchy of preference, of what we are to consider to be more important.

1. The best way is that the true Gospel is preached with the best motives.
2. The next in order is that the true Gospel is preached with impure motives.
3. The last and most unacceptable is that a false Gospel is preached.

So, if Paul had a choice, he would most certainly choose #1. However, if he couldn’t get #1, he could live with #2, but he could never settle for #3 and that’s the same perspective we should have as well.

However, there’s another very important thing to learn. The ultimate power of the Gospel is not found in the preacher, but in Christ, in the very message of the Gospel. That means that a person can be saved from hearing the true Gospel from an unsaved pastor. Yes, it is possible to be an unsaved pastor. You can be saved from hearing the true Gospel from an immoral pastor and yes, there are immoral pastors. You can even be saved from a false teacher, who accidentally preached the correct Gospel. The ultimate power is in the Holy Spirit, working through the true message that is preached. That is the most important thing. All of us should find that incredibly humbling, and fearful.

Knowing this should never serve as an excuse for being an ungodly Gospel messenger. We should never say, it doesn’t matter how I live, or what my inner motives are, as long as the message is pure. There are many, many passages that speak about that, but let me share just one. Peter, as an elder, addresses fellow elder saying this,

(1Peter 5:1) To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

What does the Apostle Peter say here? He says the motive matters. He says, don't just do your job because it's your job. Do it with a pure heart, willingly. Are you leading a Life Group, do it willingly from your heart. Are you serving in children or youth ministry, serve willingly from your heart. Are you serving as a deacon, elder, or pastor, serve willingly, with pure motives from the heart.

Friends, as Christians, we are to be Gospel-centered. That centeredness can be seen by viewing even our trials as Gospel opportunities. And secondly, by living a life that only cares that the Gospel is preached. Let's live that kind of life and let us become that kind of church.

Let's pray.