

Faith and Suffering: God's Double-sided Gift!

17th Sun. after Pentecost – 09/20/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30 Pastor Keith Besel

v.27, [Paul says,] **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ....”**

Introduction

✧ An elderly man was once elected as “moderator,” which is one of the highest and honored positions in the Church of Scotland. Proud of his election, his family hosted a celebration that included numerous grandchildren. Some weeks later, one little grandson, still impressed by his grandfather's success, was overheard telling his friends, “My grandfather was made a radiator of our church.”

➔ Though this young boy did not understand the inaccuracy that he proclaimed, the truth is that all of us as Christians, do actually serve as a form of “radiator” in Christ's Church. You do know though that there are two different kinds of radiators, right? And their purposes are the exact opposite of each other.

➔ There is the kind of radiator that we actually have along the baseboards in our fellowship hall, kitchen and office areas. As the hot water from the boiler runs through them they serve to provide and spread heat throughout the building.

➔ And then there is the kind of radiator that we have in our cars and trucks. They also have hot water running through them, but their purpose, as the cooler air outside flows over them, is to bring down; to cool the internal temperature of the engine so that it does not overheat.

✧ In the church, it is generally preferred that we believers in Christ serve as the kind of radiator that provides and spreads heat; that is the excitement and fervor that the Holy Spirit brings to flame within us in His gift of faith and through God's other gifts of Word and Sacrament.

➔ You've probably heard the phrase, He/she is really “on fire for Jesus.” This means, that person's excitement, passion and enthusiasm is such that it is obvious; that it is spreading outward to impact and affect others in a very positive and God-pleasing manner. His joy is contagious. Her positive outlook, even in times of difficulty is a source of great comfort and inspiration. And it's obvious that Jesus is the source and the force behind all of it.

➔ Unfortunately though, you and I too often can end up as the opposite kind of radiator in our faith-life; in the way that we think and talk about, and publically present ourselves as Christians. We may love and believe in Jesus, but most people around us wouldn't have any idea that we believe because there's no excitement; no joy; because we virtually keep our faith a secret from those we know and interact with. And the way that we react to difficulties or struggles is to instantly panic, or lash out in anger, or label those we think are to blame in vulgar, disrespectful or hurtful ways. In fact, we may be so “chill” about our faith, that when someone asks us we might even say “it's no big deal” or we talk it down as if we are embarrassed to be associated with Jesus.

I. Paul's suffering advances the Gospel among others.

✧ According to our Epistle reading today, that was most definitely not the case with Paul as he was currently sitting in prison because he would not stop talking, teaching and preaching about Jesus.

➔ Our temptation is to hear of Paul's unjust persecution and suffering and think “poor Paul; how unfair; how terrible that he would have to endure all of that just because of his faith in Jesus.” It's much like the way that we are tempted to react when we face difficulty, isn't it? Especially

when we just can't seem to catch a break, or when it feels like someone else – or maybe everyone else – is out to do us in.

➔ But this is not at all the outlook or message that Paul wants us to take from his difficulties in this text. In verses 12-14 Paul lists off at least four blessings; four positives that he sees from his current situation. First, he says that “what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” That is to make the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and the eternal salvation of souls known and believed by more and more people.

➔ Second, he says that “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard”; that is all of the many soldiers who took their turns watching over Paul day after day during the two years or so that his case was being heard within the Roman Emperor's courts. They all would have heard Paul make his public confession of faith in Jesus. They would have clearly seen how it was all because of Jesus that Paul was still alive after so many attempts by Satan upon Paul's life. Whippings, beatings, shipwreck and sham hearings that all led up to Paul being where he was right now.

➔ And it was not only the Imperial Guard, but Paul says, thirdly, that “all the rest” of Rome had now come to hear that his “imprisonment is for Christ.” How many unbelievers were hearing the truth about Jesus throughout this lengthy suffering and persecution that Paul had to endure here?

➔ But that's not all. Number four, Paul says in verse 14, “most of the brothers (that's fellow Christians) having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

✧ How many of us would find true joy and contentment, like Paul, in a time of extreme suffering and unjust persecution because we knew that the positive way that we were handling the situation was inspiring, strengthening and maybe even leading those around us into a saving and more mature faith in Christ?

➔ Suffering and persecution and personal difficulty; with Jesus as our God and Savior – these can absolutely be turned into a great blessing; even a gift from God. Paul said in Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things (even difficulties and suffering) work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”

II. Those with the Spirit help Paul to help them

✧ Then, beginning in verse 19 Paul turns the focus away from himself, on to those fellow Christians who are near him and are reading his letters, like this one that was going to the church in Philippi. He wants them all to know how much the Holy Spirit is using them and their actions to help and comfort and keep him strong in his faith and Christian ministry.

➔ Paul says in verse 19, “for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.” From an earthly perspective, Paul's case is quite frankly, up against seemingly impossible odds. The Roman government and especially Emperor Nero was notoriously anti-Christian, to the point of public killings in the Coliseum and coating Christians with tar to be lit on fire at night and then set up as living, screaming street lamps.

➔ Yet, Paul will not let these things deter his confident view of the future. He says the “Spirit of Jesus” (v.19) and the prayers and support of his fellow believers are helping him stay faithful to the point that “with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (v. 20).

- ✘ In fact, Paul views his situation, not as a reason for worry or to complain and spread all kinds of negative vibes throughout the Church. No, he actually sees his current status as a win-win; as if he has received a double-sided gift from God.
 - ➔ Yes, Paul looks at his future; unsure of whether he is about to die or be able to keep on living and he figures, “I can’t lose either way.” Here’s how he comes to that conclusion in verses 21-26, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 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, because of my coming to you again.”
- ✘ What a great example Paul sets for all Christians as we look to our future. For we too are in a win-win situation, as we are every day gifted with God’s double-sided gift.
 - ➔ The first gift is our salvation in Jesus Christ and the faith He has given us in the certain and sure victory that we already possess over sin, death and the devil because of Jesus’ blood that has washed us and made us citizens of heaven already today. So, no matter what happens to us, as Christ’s redeemed people, we know that whenever this earthly body dies, we “gain” the blessing of being in Christ’s presence in Paradise.
 - ➔ As for the second side of the gift, Paul shows us that God’s gift to us is all about how our lives as Christians impact those around us by the way that we view and handle the various things we face every day in this earthly existence. The Lord brought Paul to see that his suffering for Jesus; his confidence and peace in the face of constant and extreme persecution; his deeper concern for the salvation and spiritual health of those around him more than for his own personal challenges; and the way that all of that is being used by God, as verses 25-26 says, for his fellow believers’ “progress and joy in the faith”; causing them “to glory in Christ Jesus” – this is the other blessing that God has given to Paul whether or not he does end up remaining on this earth in the future.

III. What’s this mean for us today?

- ✘ Having already received this double-sided gift from God, Paul wants his readers, including you and me now today, to have and to be able to thrive in this win-win Christian life as well.
 - ➔ And so he gives us God’s very clear and loving direction beginning in verse 27. He says, “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ....” That is, consistent with the Bible’s message and truth, not contrary to it or in a manner that turns people away from Jesus.
- ✘ Paul reminds the people that even in his day, news travels. So the way that you all live and talk and act... it is publicly known. By the way, all of the references to “you” in these verses are in the plural – “y’all.” So Paul says, I want to “hear” that y’all 1) “are standing firm in one spirit.” That is, united in spirit and mind without division and bickering.
 - ➔ 2) That, “with one mind” y’all are “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (v.27). That is, everyone is doing his/her part; not just free-loading and living as lazy-in-your-faith Christians.
 - ➔ 3) That y’all are “not frightened in anything by your opponents” (v.28). That is, we are not intimidated or easily swayed by our culture, popular opinion or pressure to compromise God’s truth.
- ✘ Leading this kind of Christian life, Paul says in verse 28, is a “clear sign” to unbelievers who want to challenge our faith that they are not going to win with their false and evil tricks.

- ➔ At the same time it is a clear sign to you and me of the salvation victory that we already have from God in Jesus!
- ✘ Because, remember Jesus is where we all learn first that suffering is 1) a gift for good. Isaiah 53:5, “He was wounded for our transgressions...crushed for our iniquities...and with His stripes we are healed.”
 - ➔ 2) Suffering also serves as a means for building and strengthening our faith. Romans 5:3-4, Paul says, “...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”
 - ➔ And finally, 3) suffering actually serves as a part of our witness to others as Paul has already shown us earlier in today’s text, how the believers of his day gained confidence in the Lord and were made “bold to speak the word without fear” (v. 14).

Conclusion

- ✘ All of this, Paul says in verses 29-30, is God’s gift “granted to y’all that for the sake of Christ y’all should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake engaged in the same conflict that y’all saw I had and now hear that I still have.”
 - ➔ Did you hear that? As Christians still today, Paul doesn’t say you might receive God’s double-sided gift, but that “it has been granted to y’all” (v. 29), 1) to believe in Christ, and 2) to suffer for His name.
- ✘ That’s a win-win isn’t it? As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do,” so whether we are in a time of suffering or a time of blessing, we “do all things to the glory of God.”
 - ➔ That’s living as the right kind of radiator for Jesus. Amen.