

Joy in Spite of Detractors

Scripture: Philippians 1:15–18

Code: 50-8

INTRODUCTION

When afforded the opportunity to speak to pastors and church leaders I am often asked, "What has been the most discouraging thing in your ministry?" As far as I can remember my answer has remained consistent over the years.

There are two issues that deeply distress me. One is seeing those who ought to be the most mature in the faith—who know the Word of God well, have experienced the blessings of spiritual growth and fellowship, and have seen God's power demonstrated time and again—turn their backs on the faith and walk into sin. That's much more discouraging than when a new and untrained Christian falls into sin through ignorance.

The other thing that most distresses me is being falsely accused by fellow preachers of the gospel. For whatever reason, there are men who seem to desire to discredit the ministry of others. As a result they falsely accuse other ministers, not because those they attack are unbelievers, but simply to discredit them.

It's that second situation Paul was dealing with in Philippians 1:15-18: "Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice."

A. Trust: The Basis of the Ministry

The pain runs deep when preachers of the gospel slander, malign, misrepresent, criticize, accuse, oppose, or belittle your ministry. That's because trust is an essential aspect of any ministry. A reputation of faithfulness to God's Word is so important that men who go into the ministry need to spend their early years concentrating on laying a foundation of integrity and credibility. That requires a firm commitment to diligently study God's Word so when people check the Word for themselves (like the noble Bereans--Acts 17:10-11) they can see that what you've said about it is true. It also means a minister's life must conform to God's Word so people see a godly life underpinning and confirming his teaching. People will believe and trust that kind of minister.

A minister who cannot be trusted is like a doctor whose patients keep dying in surgery. The doctor wants people to have confidence in him, but as word gets around, people will stop coming to see him. Similarly people won't go to a mechanic if they get their car back in worse shape than when they took it in.

Ministry is based on believability and trust. Ministers speak and teach, and those who hear either believe or disbelieve what is said. When you've spent years establishing a credible ministry, it hurts when that foundation is attacked and slandered.

B. Trust in God: The Solace of the Minister

Jesus was falsely accused. The population of Jerusalem turned on Him and killed Him, yet He never did, said, or even thought anything that was wrong. When they went to kill Him He did not strike back but committed Himself to God. That's also the example Paul gave us.

The Puritan Thomas Manton said, "God is the most powerful asserter of our innocence; He has the

hearts and tongues of men in His own hands, and can either prevent the slanderer from uttering reproach, or the hearer from the entertainment of the reproach. He that hath such power over the consciences of men can clear up our innocency; therefore it is best to deal with God about it; and prayer many times proves a better vindication than [self-defense]" (cited in The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations, I.D.E. Thomas, ed. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977], p. 284).

In the midst of false accusations Paul said, "I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice" (Phil. 1:18). Those accusations were discouraging, distressing, disheartening, and discomfiting. Doubtless they produced pain and disruption in the Body of Christ. Like the factionalists at Corinth, some in Rome were pro-Paul and some were anti-Paul. Yet despite the distress such circumstances invariably cause, Paul found his solace in God and retained his joy.

Charles Simeon wrote, "Let a pious minister arise in the Established Church, and what labours [jealous men will use] to draw away his people: preachings, prayer-meetings, societies, will all be formed for this very end; and persons of popular talent will be brought from a distance to further the base design" (Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible vol. 18 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955], pp. 19-20). The godly need to expect that their service to God will be attacked. But that shouldn't effect our joy, as we see from Paul's example.

REVIEW

I. JOY IN SPITE OF TROUBLE (vv. 12-14)

LESSON

II. JOY IN SPITE OF DETRACTORS (vv. 15-18)

A. Paul's Situation (vv. 15-17)

"Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment."

There were two kinds of men emboldened by Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Phil. 1:14): his supporters and detractors.

1. The attitude of Paul's detractors

A detractor is someone who attempts to belittle, devalue, and tear down the reputation of another. It's hard to imagine a faithful man like Paul having to deal with such people, but he did. He was a holy, godly, powerful, successful, and blessed man--just the kind who threatens those with big egos and impure motives.

Paul's detractors preached the gospel, but their purpose in doing so was to discredit, defame, accuse, criticize, and dishonor Paul. That's what made their blood flow and got them up in the morning.

The "some" referred to in verse 15 reflects back to verse 14--"the brethren." Paul adds the phrase "to be sure" to emphasize that the detractors he referred to did indeed preach the gospel. Those men weren't heretics. They weren't Judaizers, gnostics, idol worshipers, or devotees of Greek mythology. They "preached Christ"--the entirety of gospel truth (vv. 15, 17-18). They weren't proclaiming another gospel (Gal. 1:6) or another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4). It wasn't Paul's theology that bothered his detractors--it was his person.

a) They were jealous Paul said their reasons for preaching were "envy and strife" (Phil 1:15). Paul's detractors were jealous of his giftedness and success. They may also have been jealous that Paul had personally encountered the resurrected exalted Lord. Paul was a menace to the prominence of his detractors so they tried to displace him from his seat of authority. b) They were contentious The Greek word translated "strife" refers to contention, conflict, and rivalry. Their jealousy pitted them against him and conflict resulted. That kind of contention is rampant in the church today. Because

people are jealous, they focus their whole lives on trying to discredit people who occupy places of blessing, such as evangelists, writers, pastors, teachers, and leaders of various ministries. Like Paul's detractors, they compete with others by using slander, accusation, and criticism--anything to tear another down. Paul was not writing to receive sympathy but to inform the Philippians how he was doing. His inspired writings show that the Lord takes note not only of what we preach but of why we preach it. The Lord is as much concerned about what is in our hearts as what is on our tongues. Jealousy among leaders in today's church is as much a problem as it was in Paul's day. c) They made false accusations against Paul. Paul didn't specify how his detractors expressed their contention and strife, but it's not too difficult to imagine their false accusations against him. (1) Some said he was being chastened. They may have speculated about some secret sin in Paul's life. They could have pointed to his dramatic change in circumstances--once he had been traveling freely with God's obvious blessing, but now he was in chains. Perhaps they said, "Paul's obviously outside of God's blessing--he must have sinned. If we knew the real truth about Paul, we'd know there's something in his life that isn't right. God must be chastening him." That's how legalists operate--they think they can read everyone's minds and know everyone's secrets. If the detractors could have uncovered some sin in Paul's life, they would have--or died trying. (2) Some said he lacked God's power. Some may have said, "The reason Paul is in prison is he hasn't learned to tap the resources of God's power like we have." That's the theology of the modern "name it and claim it" movement. They would have thought Paul an example of spiritual impotence, assuming that if he had divine power he would have burst his chains, and walked out. (3) Some said he was being replaced. Still others may have said, "The Lord put Paul in prison and left us free because Paul is old time and we're his replacements. It's time for fresh blood in the ministry." (4) Some said he was playing politics. There may even have been those who said, "If Paul were truly a godly man he'd have been martyred long ago. The government has him in chains, but instead of being bold and dying for Christ, he's playing politics and trying to get released. He'll probably work some secret deal and get off." It hurts to think of so dear a saint as Paul going through such pain--eventually to the point of reporting, "At my first defense [the first trial in Rome] no one supported me, but all deserted me (2 Tim. 4:16). He wrote to Timothy, "All who are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). When Paul wrote to the Philippians he was so bereft of friends that he said of Timothy, "I have no one else of kindred spirit" (Phil 2:20). Paul may have wondered, Is this what I get in return for all I've done for the church--a bunch of spineless people who won't come to my defense and attack me to exalt their own egos?

2. The attitude of Paul's supporters

On the other hand Paul wrote that "some also [were preaching Christ] from good will" (v. 15). The Greek word translated "good will" (*eudokian*) denotes satisfaction and contentedness. Paul's supporters were content with what God was doing in their own lives and in Paul's life. They were sympathetic towards Paul and grateful for his ministry. There are also people like that today--what a blessing, encouragement, and source of joy they are! I thank God for filling my life with people like that.

3. The motives of Paul's supporters

a) Their love for Paul. Those who supported Paul did so "out of love" (v. 16). Those who preached Christ out of envy and strife certainly weren't characterized by love. An essential element of any effective ministry is love. Paul affirmed that truth in 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (vv. 1-2). Even though Paul had detractors, there were those who had a deep affection for him and cared about him. b) Their understanding of his ministry. Paul's supporters knew he was "appointed for the defense of the gospel" (v. 16). They understood the strategic nature of Paul's ministry and knew he was in prison because he was destined--"appointed"--to be there. The Greek word translated "appointed" (*keimai*) was used to

describe a soldier's being placed on duty. God put Paul on duty to defend the gospel. The Greek word translated "defense" is apologia, from which we derive the English word apologetic. Apologetics is the branch of theology devoted to the defense of the divine origin and authority of Christianity. Paul was a defender of the gospel and had been placed by God in a strategic position to make his stand: before the imperial government in Rome. Paul had already made his defense by the time he wrote to the Philippians (v. 7). He was now awaiting his sentence and may have had that first hearing in mind when he wrote, "I am appointed for the defense of the gospel" (v. 16).

4. The motives of Paul's detractors

a) Their selfish ambitions In verse 17 Paul explains the motives of his detractors: "The former [the detractors] proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition." In contrast to the love that characterized Paul's supporters, his detractors were motivated by selfish ambition--the most wicked of all motives. They were far removed from the principles of Philippians 2:3: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself." The Philippians were not to behave like Paul's detractors in Rome. While the message of Paul's detractors was right, their motive was wrong. Selfishness comes in many forms. Peter warned against seeking after sordid gain (1 Pet. 5:2) and dominating others (1 Pet. 5:3). The apostle John spoke against seeking to be first (3 John 9). Selfishness can show itself in any of those ways. The Greek word translated "selfish ambition" (erithia) originally meant to work for hire. But it came to be applied in a negative sense toward those who sought solely to benefit themselves--to advance themselves by acquiring wealth and prestige. It was often used of those who promote themselves in the course of running for government office. It was also used of the ruthlessly ambitious--those who sought to elevate themselves at all costs. Paul's imprisonment provided the perfect opportunity for such types to enhance their personal prestige and lessen his. b) Their desire to hurt Paul Paul said his detractors were thinking to cause him distress during his imprisonment (v. 17). They weren't concerned with the church--with the purity of its doctrine or its growth. They just wanted to hurt Paul so they could be on top. "Thinking" refers to planning and scheming. They came up with various ways to aggravate Paul's already distressing situation. By attacking his integrity, credibility, faithfulness, and character, they knew they would hurt him--and that, sad to say, was their objective. "Distress" (Gk., thlipsis) means "friction." The malicious behavior of Paul's detractors added to the friction of his chains. Far from exalting Christ, protecting the church, evangelizing the lost, or defending the Word of God, their goal was to irritate Paul. Remember, Paul wasn't writing to garner sympathy. His words serve as a warning: we ought not to be surprised by similar behavior in the church today. It happened to Paul and can happen to us. Many times the New Testament warns against envy, strife, selfish ambition, and impure motives (cf. Rom. 1:29; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20-21; 1 Tim. 6:4). They are to be avoided now as much as they ought to have been then.

B. Paul's Response (v. 18)

"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice."

Paul didn't allow his circumstances to steal his joy. That's the important lesson to learn. To Paul what mattered most was that the truth of Christ was proclaimed.

The Greek word translated "proclaimed" (katangelleti) means "to proclaim with authority." Regardless of the personal cost, Paul was determined that Christ be proclaimed with authority. He could rejoice even if what motivated that proclamation was a desire to attack him (v. 18).

Paul's detractors preached the true gospel, and it had an impact. A selfishly motivated preacher can still be used of God, though not as much as he could be otherwise. That's because the truth is more powerful than the package it comes in. After all, the power "lies in the gospel, not the gospeller" (John Eadie, A Commentary of the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians [N.Y.: Robert Carter & Bros., 1859], p. 41). Often the listener knows nothing of a preacher's motive and thus concentrates on the message only.

Paul wasn't concerned about himself because he knew he was expendable. He also knew that God is the defender of the innocent and would vindicate him in due time. So he was free to rejoice in the proclamation of the gospel, however base the motives of some preachers. They weren't preaching Buddha or some false God, but Christ. So Paul could earnestly and magnanimously rejoice. He was a man of true spiritual character--unlike many in our day.

Commentator John Daille wrote, "While we detest the abominable profaneness of men who so dreadfully abuse the gospel, let us not cease to rejoice in the good effects which God produces by their hands. Let us hold the thorns of such plants in horror, and gather with thanksgiving the roses which the goodness of God causes to spring from them; and, after the example of the apostle, let us rejoice to see our Christ preached, whatever may be the mind or the hand which presents us His mysteries" (An Exposition of Philippians [MacDill AFB, Florida: Tyndale Bible Society, n.d.], p. 37). That's the attitude we're to have.

CONCLUSION

Paul lived to see the gospel proclaimed--he didn't care who received the credit. That's to be the attitude of every pastor, teacher, elder, deacon, leader, and layperson in the church. In all that he suffered Paul didn't quit, lash out, break down, or lose his joy. That's because the cause of Christ was being furthered and His name proclaimed. It was all he cared about. That's an attitude the grace of Christ instills in all who would be godly. Trials and slander are unendurable if handled in the flesh, but those in the Spirit need never lose their joy because of them.

Focusing on the Facts

1. _____ is an essential aspect of any ministry.
2. Despite the distress caused by his circumstances Paul found solace. What did he find it in? What did that allow him to do?
3. What did Charles Simeon say would happen if "a pious minister" arose in an established church?
4. What two kinds of men were emboldened by Paul's presence in Rome.
5. What does a detractor do? What specifically did Paul's detractors do?
6. Did Paul's detractors preach a gospel different from Paul's? Explain.
7. Why were Paul's detractors jealous of Paul?
8. _____ among leaders in today's church is as much a problem as it was in Paul's day.
9. What are four accusations Paul's detractors might have fabricated to discredit him?
10. What does the Greek word translated "good will" (eudokian) denote?
11. What motivations explain the attitude of Paul's supporters?
13. What motivations explain the attitude of Paul's detractors?
14. What was the only thing that mattered to Paul?
15. How is it that God can use the gospel message of a selfishly motivated preacher?
16. Why didn't Paul quit, lash out, break down, or lose his joy?

Pondering the Principles

1. How was Paul able to maintain his joy and be patient with those who ought to have been treating him as a brother, but were in fact treating him like an enemy? Jerry Bridges writes, "One of the thoughts that most disturbs a suffering Christian who has not learned patience is [the] issue of justice. He is concerned that his tormentor will escape justice, that he will not receive the punishment he deserves. The patient Christian who suffers leaves this issue in the hands of God. He is confident that God will render justice.... Instead of hoping and waiting for an opportunity for revenge, he prays for God's forgiveness of his tormentors, just as Jesus and the martyr Stephen prayed for their executioners" (The Practice of Godliness [Colorado Springs, Co.: Navpress, 1983], pp. 205-6). Does that kind of forbearance toward others and trust in God characterize your response toward those in

the church who treat you badly?

2. Paul's attitude towards his persecutors indicates he was more concerned with the salvation of the lost than with vindication for himself. That's precisely the attitude we find in Paul's description of our Lord in Philippians 2:5-8: He gave up His divine reputation and privileges that men and women might be delivered from the power of sin. The Puritan Thomas Watson pointed out that Christ "came not in the majesty of a king, attended with his [bodyguards], but he came poor; not like the heir of heaven, but like one of inferior descent. The place he was born in was poor; not the royal city Jerusalem, but Bethlehem, a poor obscure place. He was born in an inn, and a manger was his cradle, the cobwebs his curtains, the beasts his companions; he descended of poor parents" (Body of Divinity [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965 reprint], p. 196). Reflect the attitude of Christ in your life by putting sinners and their salvation uppermost in your priorities.

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