

New Life International Fellowship
Sermon by Rev. Timothy C. Geoffrion, Ph.D.
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“How do we live worthily of the Gospel?”
Philippians 1:27-30

Introduction

We are in the midst of a special sermon series on the book of Philippians. [Map] This is the third week in our series, and we’re going to focus on the main theme of the whole book, what does it mean to live worthily of the Gospel?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:27-30

Exposition of Philippians 1:27-30

“*Only...*”

1. This adverb marks a decisive shift in the letter.
2. Up to this point, his whole introduction has been one source of encouragement after another:
 - a. He expresses his confidence that God would complete the good work he began in and among them, and he tells them that he has been praying for them (1:6);
 - b. He informs them all that has happened to him, principally his imprisonment, has actually served to advance the Gospel (1:12-20), so they don’t need to worry about him and they should see the silver lining in his suffering; and
 - c. He reassures them that in spite of his preference to die and go be with the Lord, he is so devoted to them and their progress in the faith that he will certainly choose to keep living for their sake (1:21-26).
3. But now, the tone and focus of the letter shifts. Now, it’s time to talk about their responsibility. God does so much for them, and he, Paul, does so much for them. But they need to do something for themselves, too. “Blessing, blessing, blessing... *Only...*there’s something for you to do, too.”

Live your life in a manner worthy...

1. Greek: *Politeuesthe axios* = *Exercise your citizenship worthily...*
2. Here is the first imperative, the first direct command. Many English translations simply say, “live your life” (NRSV, NIV) or “conduct yourselves” (NASB), but the Greek word Paul uses actually has a political connotation. If you studied ancient Greek, you may recognize the stem of the word “polis,” which means city. By turning a noun into a verb, he’s telling them what to do as citizens of a city.

3. The meaning in context seems to be, “Conduct yourself the way citizens are supposed to conduct themselves.” Then when you add the fact that Philippi was a Roman colony, presumably filled with retired Roman soldiers and other Roman citizens, then the meaning takes on a more particular sense. He is saying, “As you are citizens of a Roman colony, so you are citizens of heaven (see 3:20). You know what it means to be a good Roman citizen, so apply the same concept to your citizenship of heaven, where your first allegiance should lie.”
4. And how do good citizens behave? They are loyal. They work for the well-being of their city or country, and not just themselves. They protect, defend, and advance their commonwealth.

...of the Gospel.

1. What do you think it means to live worthily of the Gospel?
 - a. You know what the Gospel is. It’s good news about God’s love and salvation that comes through Christ; and it’s good news for us, because through faith we have forgiveness of sins, a new identity, and hope for eternity.
 - b. And you know what it means to live worthily of something. That means, we act in a way that meets the standard of someone or something. But how can we live worthily of “good news”?
2. The answer is simply this. With the Gospel, you and I have a new hope and new identity. We have a new purpose in life. The Gospel tells you who you are, where you belong. It gives you a new flag to hoist up high in the air. It’s a flag that brings joy, hope, and meaning to your life.
3. So, to exercise your heavenly citizenship worthily of the Gospel means that you act in a way that sufficiently represents the hope that you have. You’re not lost in your sins anymore. You’re not living in dread of judgment. You’re not in this life alone. Your life now has meaning for eternity. The Gospel has given you something worth living for, and even dying for, if need be. And it’s not just for you as an individual.

Paul is about to spell out what he is referring to. But first he makes an important comment:

Stand firm in one spirit.

1. Whether I am absent or come to see you, I may hear of you...

I’m really struck by Paul’s words, “whether I am absent or come to see you.” Our attitudes and behavior should not be determined by who’s watching us. Where I come from, sometimes there’s a big emphasis on “performance,” how we behave and how we look when people are looking at us. But in private, we might say something quite different. And in our minds, our thoughts and attitudes might be the polar opposite of what we say we believe and stand for. I’ve been guilty of this double minded, double life at times. But in recent years, the Holy Spirit has convinced me that my identity as a Christian and my calling to stand firm and work together in harmony with my brothers in sisters is not supposed to change, depending on whether someone is absent or present. In fact, the starting place for maintaining a

right attitude toward God and my brothers and sisters must begin when no one is watching or listening, when I’m thinking alone, when I feel a host of negative emotions because of a conflict.

2. Striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel... (Military image)
3. In no way intimidated by your opponents. (Military image)

To exercise your citizenship worthily of the Gospel, you have to be clear about where your allegiances lie. And you have to be serious about pulling together with the others on the “team” to face the threats and to fulfill your duties.

What are the alternatives?

1. watering down your witness for fear of rejection or hostility
2. trying to go it alone—danger of isolation, vulnerability to spiritual attack and temptation
3. worse: tearing down your own team

Henri Nouwen’s advice to someone who was devoting his life to serve Christ in the church: “Living a deep and intimate relationship with your Lord Jesus will allow you to be a source of healing for many people as you walk through life full of contradictions, conflicts and violence. I also want to say to you how important it is to **be surrounded by good, caring friends who will hold you close to Christ by their affection, their care and their encouragement.** Finally, I want you to fully trust that when you stay close to Jesus and to those who, in the name of Jesus, will embrace you with their love, you cannot be other than a source of life to others.”¹

Your faith is an important sign.

1. ... of their destruction and
2. ... of your salvation
3. ... which is from God.

This verse is not entirely clear. The presence of faith in your life is a sign that God is at work in you for good purposes, including your salvation. That much is sure. What’s less sure is how their faith is a sign of the destruction of their opponents. Perhaps our faith galls those who don’t believe in Christ. Perhaps it’s our confidence in Christ that disturbs them. It’s harder for them to live in denial when they see our faith and faithfulness. They know they don’t have the hope we have, and they are scared. I don’t know for sure. But Paul’s words are surely meant to encourage the Philippians that the presence of faith in their lives is a sign that God is at work in them. And don’t be upset if your faith enrages others, because

¹ Henri Nouwen’s letter (dated, March 29, 1994) to his Dutch friend, Norbert, who is being ordained as a priest. Printed in *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life* (New York: Convergent, 2016) p. 317.

it can have that effect. It’s not because of you, it’s because your faith reveals their own tragic situation. They may lash out at you or even attack you, but if you are simply holding fast to your faith and seeking to be faithful to Christ, their reaction and behavior is about them. It doesn’t mean you’re doing something wrong or believing something wrong. In fact,

You share the same calling and grace that Paul has.

1. God has graciously granted you the privilege to not only of believing in Christ, but also of suffering for him as well.
2. You have the same “battle” that Paul has.

In the original Greek text, this verse simply says, “you have been graced on behalf of Christ.” The NRSV explains what this means by saying that it is a gracious act of God to give us this calling, and that this calling is a privilege for us. Funny to think about suffering for Christ as a grace or privilege, but that is what Paul is saying here. And he says that the Philippians have the same grace that he has, and the same struggle (or even, battle) that he has. So, what is his real point? Simply put, he’s saying, *with privilege comes responsibility, so change your attitude.* Instead of griping about how others are unfair to us, misunderstand us, mistreat us, we must think of ourselves first as citizens of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God. *We must put first the purposes and the people of the Kingdom—everyone, not just ourselves, even if it means suffering and having to work through unpleasant conflicts with one another.*

Paul already modeled for them the proper attitude for citizens of Heaven. He didn’t complain about his chains. Instead, he rejoiced in the spreading of the Gospel. He didn’t complain about having to go on in this life. Instead, he willingly accepted that he would remain alive for the sake of the Philippians and Christian ministry. To him, his suffering was not an unfortunate burden. It was a privilege and a joy. He was given the gift of faith and had been selected by God to serve Christ and the body of Christ, and even to share in Christ’s sufferings.

Conclusion

What Paul said to the Philippians, he also would say to you today: You have received so many blessings from God and from others, gifts of faith, nurture, encouragement, and service. But being citizens of Heaven is not just about getting blessings for yourself. It requires something of you, as well. To exercise your citizenship worthily of the Gospel you must stand firm in your identity as Christians and do so in unity with your fellow citizens, that is the body of Christ. You can’t fulfill your duties alone, and we need one another, both for our sake and the sake of our witness to the world. The purposes and people of the Kingdom must come first in your thinking and behavior. This is our shared calling, and this calling is from God.

Closing Prayer

For self-reflection and discussion

1. What would “exercising *my* spiritual citizenship worthily of the Gospel” look like in my context and set of circumstances?
2. What metaphor or picture represents the ideal collaborative relationship with fellow Christians in my church? (e.g. sports team, exploration team, fellow gardeners growing vegetables or flowers together, etc.)
3. What attitudes or actions do I need to change in order to work together better with my fellow citizens of Heaven (the Kingdom of God)?
4. How am I handling the trials and suffering in my life? Are they distancing me from God or others, or am I letting them draw me closer to others and to God? Do I believe that my suffering may serve a divine purpose? Do I value sharing in Christ’s suffering as a gift? (See Romans 1:17.)