

“Living Worthy of the Gospel”
Philippians 1:27-28

When you think of “gospel preaching,” what comes to mind? Evangelism? Handing out tracts? Talking about eternal things with co-workers, neighbors? Perhaps world missions and unreached people groups? I suspect for most of us, our instinct is to associate the concept of “preaching the gospel” primarily with the idea of reaching the lost. In other words, the gospel is what we tell people in order for them to “get saved.” **But as far as how exactly the gospel applies to life as a Christian, and how it applies to the life of the church – there we are much less clear.**

I want to show from Scripture this morning that when we fail to understand the importance the gospel in the Christian life and the life of the church – and mainly think of it as the means by which a person can get “saved” – we fail to do justice to the gospel. And as a consequence, we rob ourselves of God’s wonderful design and intent to bless His people even after conversion with the riches of the gospel.

To accomplish this, I’d like to direct your attention this morning to Philippians 1:27-28. **The background of Paul’s relationship to the Philippians will prove helpful for the passage we’ll be studying.** From Acts 16, we know that Paul and his co-laborers had planted the Philippian church. They’d since moved on to other regions, but had stayed in touch with the church during his missionary journeys. Paul mentions elsewhere in this letter that the Philippian church was very faithful in providing financial and prayer support in his missionary work, and had even sent one of their own members (a “short-term missionary”) to care for Paul when he ended up in jail in Rome. And it’s actually from jail that Paul writes this letter to the church. And that brings us to the passage we’re reading today. Just before, Paul has been expressing his desire to see the Philippians again. But he knows it’s altogether possible that it may not happen, that he may die in jail. So, in v. 27, he writes:

²⁷Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; ²⁸in no way alarmed by your opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God.

In this passage lies the key to understanding Paul’s desire for this church, and God’s intent for every church. Not knowing whether he’d be able to return to them anytime soon, he conveys to them just one theme, one command, one hope. And it’s summed up in these few words:

²⁷Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...

This morning, what I’d like to do is unfold for you the meaning of these words, and show how immensely critical this command is for our church. We’ll first examine the nature of the command itself, and then consider how to apply it. **There are four points we should see about the nature of “living worthy of the gospel”:**

1. It's important.

Paul begins his command with the word "only." In the Greek, this is the word *μονος* from which we get words such as "monopoly" (a single entity which maintains power over an entire market), "monologue" (a speech by a single person), and even "monk" (a person who spends his life alone, in solitude). As you can guess from these English derivations, the word signifies singleness, something that stands alone. One translation (ISV) translates this word helpfully as "the only thing that matters." In Paul's mind, if he heard nothing else about this church, if they did nothing else, they should "live worthy of the gospel."

Thus, the first thing we should see is that this command is very important. **Literally, it's the only priority that Paul wants to convey to this young and faithful church plant.** He has but one concern while absent from them: "If I hear of nothing else about you, Philippians, I want to hear *only* this: that you are living worthy of the gospel."

2. It's all-inclusive.

The next thing we should see about this command is that it's *all-inclusive*. The next word in this verse is translated "live," "let your manner of life," or "conduct yourselves." **The Greek word that Paul uses is *πολιτευομαι* from which we get the word "politics."** The meaning of this word goes beyond what we typically think of as politics (e.g., government, politicians, elections and the like). It refers to every citizen's responsibilities and duties to obey the law of the land. This command could be translated, "Live as a citizen worthy of the gospel."

But Paul's concept of citizenship is not limited to one's national loyalties. In 3:21, Paul says of believers, "[Our] citizenship (*πολιτευμα*) is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." The citizenship Paul has in mind is a *heavenly* citizenship. **He is expecting them to direct their loyalties not merely to earthly rulers. He is referring to their duty to the King of kings, who wants all of our heart, soul, mind and strength!** There is no part of a heavenly citizen's life that is exempt from this command. It is all-inclusive.

The command to live worthy of the gospel could be paraphrased, "Let all that you do, all that you say, all that you desire and hope for, at all times, be worthy of the gospel of Christ."

3. It's fundamental.

The third thing we need to notice about this command is that it's fundamental. **Paul's command appeals to the most fundamental, the most basic truth of the Christian faith: the gospel.** "Only conduct yourselves *worthy of the gospel.*"

But what does it mean to live "*worthy of*" the gospel? **"Worthy of" can mean one of two things. It could mean that we are to live so as to *deserve* the blessings of the gospel.** An example of this use would be to say that a runner is "worthy of a prize" if he wins a race, because he has *earned* the prize. Paul could be saying, "Philippians, live so as to deserve (or earn) the blessings of the gospel. Be worthy of what Christ has done for you." That is one way to interpret the word "worthy." But the problem with this interpretation is that it flatly contradicts the message of the gospel. The gospel is a gift of God, "not by works so that no one can boast." You can't earn a gift! So Paul simply can't mean "worthy" in this sense of "deserving" the gospel.

That leaves us with one other possibility. In Matthew 3:8, the same word translated “worthy” is used in the account of John the Baptist, when he says, “... *bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*” The idea here is one of living up to a standard: “bear fruit *that is consistent with the repentance you profess.*” Or, “true repentance should result in specific fruit.” **And that’s exactly the meaning that Paul has in mind in Philippians 1: “The gospel should result in specific conduct.”** He is exhorting them to look at the gospel and to live in a manner *consistent* with its message. “Believers, get your lives consistent with the gospel.” What exactly that means in practice, we’ll look at it in a moment, but **the point I want to make here is that this singularly important command is not appealing to some fancy theological framework, or some higher spirituality; it’s rooted in the most fundamental truth of the Christian faith – the gospel.**

4. It’s a command to the church!

So this command to live worthy of the gospel is *important, all-inclusive, and fundamental.* **But there is one more aspect of this command: It’s a command to the church!** Look again at v. 27:

²⁷Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you [plural] are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

Paul has a very specific idea in mind in this passage, and it’s directed at the church. To “stand firm in one spirit” makes no sense if we apply it at an individual level. It must be applied to a group of individuals as one unit. Likewise, the command to “strive together” is actually a compound verb that is directed at a group. Paul is not giving a generic command to individuals within the church, e.g., “Let your lives [as individuals] be worthy of the gospel.” **He is giving a command to the Philippians about their conduct, identity and life *together* as a church. His expectation is that *together* they were to live worthy of the gospel.**

So now we know the *nature* of the command. **We can sum it up this way: “Church, live in a manner consistent with the gospel.”** But how do we know if we’re doing it? What does that mean in practice? What specific marks are characteristic of a church living worthy of the gospel? The rest of the passage points us to **three specific marks:**

1. Together by the gospel: unity (v. 27b)

The first mark of a gospel-worthy church is that we are held together *by* the gospel, and characterized by *unity*. We can see this in the second half of v. 27, which says that the church is to stand firm *“in one spirit, with one mind striving together!”*

Far too many churches in our day have ruined the reputation of the gospel by their failure to exhibit loving unity. But this is hardly a modern problem. The saints in Corinth were well known for their gifts, their zeal for God, even the ability to speak in tongues and prophecy. But it was a church that was also horribly divided and filled with pride. Much of Paul’s two letters to the Corinthian church was aimed at rebuking them for their divisiveness. The well-known passage from 1 Cor. 13, “Love is patient, love is kind,” etc., was not written to serve as an inspirational theme for weddings and greeting cards. It is preceded by a stinging rebuke: *“... if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am **nothing**...”* They did not have love, and all their gifts amounted to nothing as a result! 1 Cor. 13 is actually a rebuke of a church that had left behind the most essential characteristic of the Christian life: love. **The church without loving unity is contradicting the gospel it professes.**

So unity is essential to any church that wants to be worthy of the gospel.

But unity is hard. We all know this by intuition, and most of us know by experience. Biblical community requires us as still imperfect sinners to serve alongside each other in close proximity. And closeness inevitably results in friction. Misunderstandings occur. Feelings get hurt. And sometimes, we even sin against each other. **Unity is *not* easy.**

So how do we attain to one spirit, one mind, striving together, if unity is so hard? The only way we will be able to do it is by the gospel itself.

- **The only way we will forgive each other when wronged** is when we realize how much God has forgiven us in the gospel: “He who is forgiven much, loves much” (Luke 7:47).
- **The only way we will be patient with each other** is when we grasp God’s patience toward us in the gospel (2 Pe. 3:9)
- **The only way we will walk in humility and not pride** is when we understand that whatever we are and whatever we have is a gift from God by the gospel (1 Cor. 4:7).
- **The only way we will consistently love each other** is when we are overwhelmed and changed by God’s love toward us in the gospel (Ro. 8:38-39).

The unity that God expects of the church is only possible *through the power and example of the gospel working in our lives.*

Only when we are regularly dwelling on and transformed by the gospel will we have the ability to sustain Biblical unity in our church. We must be <i>together by</i> the gospel.
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2. **Together for the gospel: truth (v. 27b)**

This leads us to the second mark of a church that is living worthy of the gospel. For many churches, they have a unity, but it is built on the wrong foundation. They are built on a common commitment to social justice, or attaining prosperity, or even affirming sin in the name of “inclusiveness.” **But the church must be united together for one chief cause alone: the gospel. That is, we are to exist together for the truth.** This is clear from verse 27b as well, where we are commanded to “with one mind [strive] together for the faith of the gospel.” The idea behind “the faith of the gospel” is not subjective faith (“I believe in”) but it’s the idea of the truth, the body of doctrine that is the gospel.

It seems so obvious, you might say. “Surely no one would argue that the gospel is not the reason we gather, to uphold its truth.” Yet none of the denominations that we’d identify today as having abandoned the gospel started that way. Few churches that still call themselves Christian would openly admit to have thrown away the gospel (though perhaps they’ve redefined it). But that makes it all the more important for us who still have the gospel to be wary of making the same mistakes. So what happened? **One of the chief ways churches move away from the gospel is by *assuming* the gospel, instead of consciously upholding the and guarding the truth of the gospel.** D.A. Carson describes the problem this way when he speaks of the history of the Mennonite Brethren:

One particular analysis goes like this: the first generation believed and proclaimed the gospel and thought that there were certain social entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel and advocated the entailments. The third generation denied the gospel and all that were left were the entailments.

It is absolutely crucial that we never *assume* the gospel and “move on” from its precious truths to its implications. We must always consciously be a people of the gospel! If we ever let the gospel become a “given” and begin to focus instead on how to make it “relevant,” before long the gospel will no longer be the reason we gather. And we will no longer be a gospel-worthy church.

Consider as well the thoughts of the pastors who’ve put together the “Together for the Gospel” conference, who reflect on the history of the church, and offer this diagnosis:

We are convinced that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been misrepresented, misunderstood, and marginalized in many churches and among many who claim the name of Christ. ... God’s glorious purpose for Christ’s church is often eclipsed in concern by so many other issues, programs, technologies, and priorities.

The gospel is usually not simply tossed aside, it becomes “eclipsed” by other priorities. At first, it is relegated to the background and simply lost in the shadows. But eventually it is lost altogether while the church focuses on a more “sophisticated” or “relevant” sort of Christianity. **But a Christian church that doesn’t uphold the truth and centrality of the gospel of Christ is not Christian at all.**

So don’t assume the gospel. The glorious realities of the gospel are the reason we gather, the reason we sing, the reason we exist. We have been given the only truth that will set people free: the glorious gospel of Christ. We must stand together for the truth of the gospel.
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3. **Together in the gospel: clarity and courage (v. 28-29):**

Finally, what is the third mark of a church that is living worthy of the gospel? **It is a church that is together in the gospel, marked by clarity and courage.**

This last mark of a gospel-worthy church – its witness to the world – is possibly the most obvious one, and yet in many ways the most elusive one. One author on evangelism put it this way: we can be like members of a fishing club who spend all of our time talking about the glories of fishing and reveling in big catches we've had, sharing tips on how to catch this kind of fish or that... so much so that we're no longer *fishing!*

We live in a day and age when the truth of the gospel is under attack (yet when has it not been?). And so we expend great effort – rightly so – to protect the gospel. And without a doubt, the gospel is something worthy dwelling on and speaking about with another, as we glory in its benefits. But the great irony is that in doing these important tasks we can forget to *share* the gospel. We have the “good *news*.” We should be shouting it from the rooftops! As Romans 10 says, “How can they believe... how can they hear... unless someone is sent!”

To live worthy of gospel, we must be witnesses of its message to the world. And this passage highlights two characteristics of a faithful witness, worthy of the gospel of Christ.

First, it is a witness marked by clarity. We see in v. 28 that the opponents of the church have no illusions about the message the church is proclaiming.

²⁸in no way alarmed by your opponents--**which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation** for you, and that too, from God.

Those outside the church, even those who oppose the church, may not like the gospel message, but they understand it. They understand it is a message of destruction for them, and salvation for those who believe it – even if they disagree. There is no confusion about the gospel – it is not about equality, nor “your best life *now*.” **People who come into contact with our church should know that the gospel is above a message of eternal consequence.** There must be clarity in our preaching and sharing of the gospel. It is not a message about “health and wealth.” It is not a message about “self-esteem.” It is a message of salvation for those who believe and destruction for those who do not.

Second, a faithful witness is marked by courage. Paul writes that the church should be “in no way alarmed by your opponents” (v. 28). **A gospel-worthy church does not merely stand up timidly for truth, it speaks the gospel with courage!** Vv. 29 continues by pressing home that the church is called to suffer for the gospel. We must be willing to suffer, and we must be willing to do so with boldness and courage.

What does a clear and courageous witness look like? [Insert news brief from Christians in Kenya, being persecuted, yet continuing to witness to amongst a hostile Moslem population]

The children's song gets right here what we so easily forget: “Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine!” To live worthy of the gospel, we must be a church clearly and courageously declaring the gospel everywhere we go.

So we close this study at a similar place as where we began. The gospel – clearly and courageously preached – is a message of salvation and destruction. **It is a message to the lost, to be given to those who are without hope and without God.**

Yet our study of Philippians 1 shows that the gospel is not just a message to be preached to unbelievers. We must preach the gospel *to ourselves* every day! It is far more than just the start of the Christian life. It is the *heart* of the Christian life and the life of the church. **The most important distinctive of any Christian church is that it should be together by the gospel, together for the gospel, and together in the cause of the gospel.**

Last Sunday, we were challenged to check our hearts, in our individual walks with the Lord, to see whether we'd allowed peripheral things, even good things, to become idols that had distracted us from the most important priority: following and loving Jesus. **Today, I want to issue a similar challenge, but to us as a church family.** If someone were in our midst for two months, would they see **the power, the importance and the clear message** of the gospel? Not only from our pastors and elders, leaders or teachers; but from every member of our entire church family? **Would they say of us, "This is a church that loves the gospel of Jesus Christ?"**

To the degree this would be so, thanks be to God. And where we would be found wanting, may God work in us to be yet still more "worthy of the gospel of Christ."