

Joy in Christ Centered Ministry - Part 2

Philippians 1:19-26

"If dying is not gain, then living is not Christ."

Introduction: There have been a few times in my life that I realized I was totally out of place, or had not reason being where I was. The first was right out of college and newly married, meeting with a buddy who was trying to break into the financial management world. He went over all the values of financial planning, projecting out what different levels of investments would yield in 40 years, and laying on (thick I might add) how important it was to provide for my wife and future kids. When we filled out the initial worksheet, I had a couple *hundred* dollars of liquid income and a negative net worth (thank you, student loans!). We both realized that he was barking up the wrong tree with me. The second was at a time share meeting (which I attended solely for the free gift). They threw out astronomical numbers based on what we made, and I had to chuckle as we threw out the word "NO" in about 40 different ways (perhaps even other languages). In each of these situations, the numbers were so large compared to my present situation, it was not only overwhelming, it seemed impossible and de-motivating.

Sometimes this is how we can feel with the life and teachings of Paul. It can feel so completely different than our experience that it leaves us with a sense of inadequacy but also de-motivation. Especially when we look at well known mantras like **"To live is Christ, and to die is gain."** We like and appreciate the sentiment, even memorizing and repeating it, but not really sure what it means for our daily lives. On the way back from Kyrgyzstan several years ago, we got news that one of my best friends lost his entire family in a car accident. In one moment, the family that he had been so close with was gone. When we spent time together in Houston, we talked about this verse. His statement made sense, "I understand that to die is gain. But I'm struggling to understand 'living is Christ'." At the time I had no great answer or profound statement to satisfy the question, but instead shook my head in agreement.

This morning we will look deeper into what it looks like to have Christ as the center of our lives (remember the Solar System picture), and the implications to our life and ministry. Our hope is to gain perspective, clarity, and purpose in order to answer the questions of *"why do we fear death?"*, *"why dying feels like loss"*, and *"why do I get up everyday"*. In unpacking this section, we not only get insight into the mind of Paul, but we gain insight into our own hearts and minds, rooting out any place that Christ is not valued or magnified.

Christ Centered Ministry Maintains Perspective (19-20)

"Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that **through your prayers** and the **help of the Holy Spirit** of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all **ashamed**, but that with full courage now as always, **Christ will be honored** in my body, whether by life or by death."

Assurance of Deliverance

We pick up the next section of this letter and remember where Paul is writing. He is imprisoned, chained to a guard 24 hours a day, with no privacy. He is awaiting trial that will determine his freedom or his death. While in prison, other believers were taking shots at him, trying to afflict him while he was in prison, questioning Paul's character and leadership out of jealousy, envy, and selfish ambition. There was nothing in Paul's life that he could control except his reputation, and even that he decided not to try to defend. Instead, he responded with **rejoicing**, in the advancement and proclamation of the gospel

and the magnification of Jesus Christ. But he was NOT DONE in his explanation of why he rejoiced. He continued on in an explanation of his mind, desires, and purpose in life. This is a personal, intimate, and emotion laden section where Paul reveals why he rejoiced in spite of circumstances that otherwise would have been reason for complaint. His first reason was **he maintained assurance of his deliverance**.

What did he mean by this? Did this mean he was sure he would get out of prison and live? Did he have some insider information or a prophetic word of his release? These would be reasonable assessments, but not what Paul meant. His deliverance had nothing to do with prison, since he was not concerned with whether he lived or died. His deliverance would have been similar to Job in Job 13:15-16, where Job said, *"Though he slay me, I will hope in Him; yet i will argue my ways to his face. **This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before Him.**"* Paul's statement is a word for word usage of Job's words from the Septuagint, and he realized, like Job, that he was not in the present situation because of sin, but rather because of God's unique purposes. Deliverance meant that when they would stand before God, they would be **vindicated** before Him, despite what others said and despite what the circumstances seemed to indicate. He was **sure** ("know" means knowing with certainty) because of **two distinct reasons**:

Through Prayers of believers

Paul spent much time in prayer for the church, both in thanksgiving and request that they would mature and become more loving, discerning, and holy. But he was equally desirous and dependant on the prayers of the church for himself. Through almost all of his letters, he mentioned the necessity of the church praying for him (see 1 Thess. 5:25, Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; 2 Cor. 1:8-11). He knew that an essential part of *his growth and maturity* was the prayer of others. That is why prayer should never be token. Prayer for each other should be given a huge emphasis in our individual lives and our community gatherings. God works through the prayers of believers on behalf of each other's growth.

Through the Person of the Holy Spirit

The second part of his assurance was the help, supply, or provision of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. How does Christ live in us? Through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our guarantee of future life with Christ (2 Cor. 5:5), who helps us in our weakness, interceding for us when we don't know what to pray ourselves (Rom. 8:26). He is the power at work in us (Eph. 3:20). The Holy Spirit actively assures us of our salvation, of our future, and provide help in our weakness.

Expectation of Honor

Paul was hopeful and eagerly expectant, but it was not about getting out of prison. What he desired was to magnify Christ since he found Jesus as having infinite worth, so he wanted to make sure he would 1) **Not be ashamed** and 2) **full of courage to honor Christ in his body**. Shame is that horrible sense of guilt or failure when you do not measure up in front of people whose approval you value the most. That is why we feel that type of shame when we stumble over our words in a public speech, forget our lines, or miss the free throw. Shame is what a father feels when he needs to confess his sin in front of his kids or when a teenager does something in public to disparage the family name. For Paul, it was not the feeling of personal shame that he feared, it was bringing *anything* shameful, or attaching anything disparaging to the name of Christ. So whether in his time of imprisonment, his trial, his release, or even his death, he wanted to walk in **courage** to bring **honor to Christ**. His goal was to please Christ (2 Cor. 5:9), and did not want to act in a way that people would see his life or death as reason to lower the value or glory of Jesus. So in this, he was not **afraid of living or dying**, but had perspective that in both, he wanted to honor Christ.

Why do we fear death? What is it about death that threatens us?

In his first sermon at Bethlehem Baptist during his candidacy, John Piper said this about death: "***Death is a threat to the degree it frustrates our goals. Death is fearful to the degree that it threatens to rob us of what we want most.***" Death, then, is loss to us since it takes away from us what we value the most. For Paul, he could say that since what he wanted most was to honor Christ, death was not fearful, only dishonoring Christ would have been. This changes the mindset and paradigm of how we process death, instead of trying to maintain artificial control of life, we embrace the reality of Christ's control over it all.

Christ Centered Ministry Clarifies Tension (21-24)

"For to me **to live is Christ, 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."

This view of life and death created real tension for Paul. Since living was Christ and dying was gain, when faced with a choice between the two, he would not be able to choose between the two (if it were up to him). He described it as being hard pressed between these two realities, like a choice between spending a week with Erin away from the girls, or having her away for a week and me staying with the girls. Out of these two, one is preferred, but both are advantageous and necessary. Paul makes it abundantly clear what he'd prefer, yet both held the prospect of gain for him.

The Gain of Living

What does "living is Christ" look like? Paul answers that with synonymous concepts. If God was going to keep him on this earth, whether in prison or free, it would mean **fruitful labor** for him. This sheds light on two ways that living in Christ:

1) **We live and pray for fruitfulness** - This is what he had heard about the church at Colossae, that the *"gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is **bearing fruit** and increasing --- as it does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth."* (Col. 1:5-6). Paul prayed that they would walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, **bearing fruit** in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). If Christ is the center point of our life where everything else originates, it means we know the target. It is clear our mission is to "love God and love others", and the true way to love others is see them come to a growing understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why we pray for *more*, and we pray for *more fruitful* work among our neighbors, family, work, and community. We believe that since God is at work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13), there should be fruit being produced. ***Where do you see fruit being produced out of your prayers and hope in the Lord?*** Are there people who have heard the gospel from you, who have a clearer view of reality, life, and death as result of a relationship with you?

2) **We labor to this end** - Believers in Jesus Christ should not only live expectantly, we should work laboriously. Paul knew ultimate rest would come one day, but until then he would labor to the point of exhaustion for the sake of others. We will look at it in a couple of weeks, but we are to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12), meaning working out what is the reality in us. If Christ is central, and if we have the Spirit indwelling us, and if we have knowledge of where true joy comes from, and if we can give hope to those struggling with depression, pain, and abuse, then we should **LABOR** hard to that end.

We all work hard at what is most valuable to us: our job, advancing in our position; our body, working out by exercise, denying ourselves the delights of bellies (no gluten, dairy, sugar, or fried food; our hobbies, we spend our margin of time and money on those areas that we love, from sports to crafts. Now, none of this is bad, but that is NOT what Paul lived for, and it was not what motivated him to stay. He stayed and worked hard for **fruitfulness**, determining, considering, and deciding the best use of his time so that it would be the MOST fruitful. This is the passage that motivated John Piper to move from teaching in a Christian college to becoming a pastor, not because pastoral work is the only form of fruitfulness, but to maximize his gift of teaching and training others to love Christ.

The Gain of Dying

So if that is what "living is Christ" means, what does dying is gain mean? Simply put, Paul believed that being with Jesus was better than staying here and walking by faith without Him (see 2 Cor. 5:6-9). He knew that someday he would see Jesus for who He is (1 John 3:2), and that it would happen immediately upon his death. He used the word for "**lust**" to describe his desire, using a triple comparative (it is very much better to be with Christ). For Paul, being in the presence of Jesus was the pinnacle desire of life.

Did this diminish his love for the people in this world, or that it would not cause sadness when he was gone? BY NO MEANS! Sorrow and joy are not mutually exclusive ideas, since we are called those who "are sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). Death is NOT what we were created for, but was brought on by the Fall by sin, meaning that a humanity created to live forever with God now had to taste death, as well as the process of dying, which we are all living through right now. But notice that Paul did NOT say **death would be loss, but rather that death would be gain!** How did he get there? Think about it this way in a simple way, filling in the blanks of this statement:

If life is _____, then dying is _____

Facing death betrays what is truly in our heart, revealing what we truly love and treasure. So if our life is anything besides Christ, death will be loss. Even family is yielded to our love of Christ (see Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26). If dying is truly gain, not simply a cessation of pain or ridding ourselves of a terrible circumstance, then living can be Christ. All of us dread the dying process, but when Christ is our life, dying does not simply become "not scary", it becomes gain.

Christ Centered Ministry Provides Purpose (25-26)

"**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."

Convinced of Better Labor

Coming to conclusions based on faith is freeing. When we are *convinced and certain*, life becomes settled and decisions become clear, with circumstances moving from threatening our happiness to becoming means to grow. Paul was convinced of what his life was about, what his **purpose and goals were**. Don't underestimate the power of this. This is what every person we come into contact with is trying to figure out and are afraid of the answer. The question is simply this:

Why do I get up every day? What motivates me each day?

If the answer to this question is temporal (providing for my family, setting life up for retirement, leaving a legacy) they all fall short when the inevitable crises happens that is out of our control, or when something that we value is taken away. For Paul, his labor was laser focused and clear. He worked for two things in regards to others:

1. Their growth in faith - In chapter 1:12, Paul used the word for "**ADVANCE**" in reference to the gospel overcoming obstacles to enter into the city of Rome, despite him being in prison. Here, he used the word to talk about the maturing or advancing in faith. This was his goal of the churches, "***Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.***" (Col. 1:28-29). This means that our faith is built to grow as we trust God more and trust ourselves less. As we grow in knowledge of God, deepening our affection for God in Christ. Paul would continue to teach, preach, proclaim, and train the churches to this end. It would drive and motivate him. It's what got him up in the morning, and reminded him why he went to bed exhausted every night.

2. Their growth in joy in faith - But there was a second aspect of growing in faith, and that was progressing in **joy**. Paul said something extraordinary to the church in 2 Corinthians 1:24, saying that he was a worker for their joy for they stood firm in their faith. Joy is not optional and deepening of our faith deepens our joy. This is how we can define or identify ourselves as pastors, disciplers, parents, and teachers. We are workers for the joy of others, which necessitates that we ourselves have tasted this joy, since we cannot commend something we have not walked in ourselves. When our kids are trying to live up to cultural standards of expectations and realize they never could, they need to know there is something better in Christ. When our friends are struggling through pain, frustrations, and depressing circumstances, we point them to Someone better. This all means that joy is not only possible, but it also is something that grows as we walk with Christ.

Cause to Glory in Jesus Christ

The purpose clause "so that" tells what the ultimate purpose of all of this was. In the Greek text, the phrase "in Christ Jesus" precedes the phrase "in me", meaning that the proud confidence of the church would about in Christ Jesus, as He is seen in me. In other words, the purpose of Paul's work in coming back to the church would have been that they would have more reason to glory in Christ Jesus, as he did in everything.

So how would you answer some of these questions? When you think about death, what comes into your mind in terms of loss? When you think about this, is dying gain? Is Christ your life? The reality of these questions is: we must all answer them, and ignoring them is already an answer. We possess something far better than anything else this world can offer, so we cling to Christ with all of who we are, so we too can say, "**to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**"

Questions to Discuss (in a group or alone)

- We need **prayers of others** and the **help of the Holy Spirit** in order to grow. What are ways that we can grow in who we pray for and how we pray? What does it look like for us to walk by the Spirit (see Galatians 5:16-26).

- Processing death shows what we truly value and desire, and for Paul it revealed that death was also about Christ. Why do we fear death, or what is it about death we truly fear? What does this reveal in us about how central Christ is?
- If life is _____, then death is _____. How would you fill in these blanks?
- What gets you up in the morning? What is the purpose by which you live your life? What is the goal you have to grow in your own life? In your spouse? Your kids? in this church? What would "fruitful labor" look like?

Counseling Thought:

The phrase "to live is Christ and to die is gain" is like a spiritual diagnostic. It reveals parts in us where Christ is not all. In honest evaluation, what are things that are of more value or that we treasure more than Christ? The hard part is that these can be good things, yet things that take the place that only Christ should hold. If we find those areas, it gives us opportunities to examine, confess, and repent, turning from our idolatry to cling to Christ. In doing this, not only will we find greater joy, we will actually be able to love these things properly.