

The Profitable Life - Philippians 1:21

Scripture Reading: Philippians 1:12-21

Introduction

It's somewhat rare for New Year's Day to fall on a Sunday as it does this year

It might not seem so since we last opened the year with a Sunday in 2017, but the next time it will happen will be eleven years from today, in 2034

There is something about starting a new year that causes people to become contemplative about life

Maybe it's seeing the blank pages of a brand new calendar that gives a person the hope that things could be different, better somehow, going forward

For that reason, the start of a new year typically causes many people to make resolutions to change something about themselves or their lives

We aren't immune from that tendency in the church, so since New Year's Day falls on a Sunday this year, I thought we might take some time to consider how we might improve our lives as Christ-followers in 2023

The things I'm going to show you this morning are intensely personal, much like when we see Joshua challenge the people of Israel [Joshua 24:15] –

"...choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

And they apply to all people everywhere, whether they are a follower of Jesus Christ or not, but they have special significance for those who follow Christ

I think I could claim, without fear of contradiction, that each one of us would say we would like to make progress in our walk with Christ - that we want to be a "better" Christian when we reach the end of 2023 than we are today

I would hope that would be the case anyway

But most times, we approach change in our Christian walk as Alice did in Lewis Carroll's famous book Alice in Wonderland, who, while seeking directions from the Cheshire Cat, asked:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where..." said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"...so long as I get SOMEWHERE," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

And we are also sure to get somewhere, but as we soon discover, not all change is positive, and not all movement is progress

If we are going to experience positive change and make progress in our spiritual walk, we must make sure that we are aiming for the right thing and going about it in the right way

Because it's very frustrating to work at climbing a ladder only to discover that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall and we are getting somewhere we never wanted to be in the first place

And the reason many Christ-followers struggle in their walk can be traced back not just to *what* they are doing but *why* they are doing it - to what motivates them

Because doing even the right things for the wrong reasons is detrimental

And while there is any number of factors that can go into forming someone's motivation, we can look at motivation under two broad categories - **living for self** and **living for Christ**

I. Two motivations

The first motivation is the one that most people follow:

A. Living for self

Paul mentions this motivation in **Philippians 2:21**, where he writes concerning the believers in the city of his imprisonment:

For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

Understand, the people Paul was talking about here weren't "bad" people

They were fellow believers and members of the church where he was imprisoned

I imagine they were active in their church - attending church and Bible studies, listening to sermons, serving in various ministries, and giving from the resources that God had blessed them with

But their motivation was wrong - they were self-serving and seeking their own interests

And that's a common malady - even in churches today

Let's admit that we all have a selfish streak

We are naturally interested in ourselves, our advancements, our needs and wants, and our concerns

After all, the second greatest commandment after love God with all your heart, soul, and mind is to love your neighbor as yourself

Our capacity for self-love is limitless

But when we live for self, we are living according to the wrong motivation

So, let me be clear, what I'm talking about isn't what you do or don't do - I'm not trying to guilt anyone into doing more, attending more, giving more, or even spending more personal time with the Lord

What I'm talking about is *why* you do or don't do all those things and all the other things you do or don't do

What is your motivation behind the decision to serve or not to serve in a particular ministry, to attend church or a Bible study, to participate in worship, to use the gifts God has given you, or whatever the case may be?

A little earlier in **Philippians 2:3**, Paul had just commanded his readers:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit

Again, Paul is writing about motivation, and he says don't let your own satisfaction be what motivates you

Don't allow your personal desires and what others think of you be the primary things that drive you

Then, in verse 4 [**Philippians 2:4**], he wrote:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests...

Notice he doesn't say, "Don't consider your own interests at all" he says that self-interest should not be the only factor one considers - and in context, he is talking about also taking the interests of others into account

But at the end of verse 21 [**Philippians 2:21**], he indicates that all other believers there were so wrapped up in their own interests that they were ignoring even the interests of Jesus Christ

Remember that these weren't "bad" people - they were people who were prone to the same self-interest that we war against regularly

Going to Philippi was no small thing - travel was much more difficult and lengthy then - and the people had families and businesses and other interests the same as we do today

They weren't contemplating a short-term mission trip - going would have meant a major commitment and sacrifice

And they allowed themselves to be motivated more by their own interests than they should have, just as we often do

And that brings us to our second motivation:

B. Living for Christ

That was Paul's motivation

Look with me at **Philippians 1:21** -

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

We tend to focus on the last half of that verse as we contemplate the joys of an eternity with Christ - and that's a great thing that we will consider in a bit

But Paul here is also revealing what should be the motivation for living, really for all people but especially for true followers of Christ

So let's explore just what Paul means when he says, "to live is Christ"

Basically, what Paul is indicating is that everything about his life points to Christ with the intention of bringing him glory

This is more than saying that Christ is at the center of one's life - it's saying Christ and the things of Christ *are* one's life

We see what Paul means illustrated by his circumstances when he wrote those words

Paul was in a Roman prison awaiting sentencing and had been imprisoned for somewhere around two years when he wrote this letter

That alone would probably be enough to sour most of us but look at all that he said was going on during his imprisonment

He said others were emboldened to preach the gospel and that, while some were doing so from good will and love, others were trying their best to hurt him because they saw themselves as being in competition with Paul

And yet Paul says that everything he was going through had "served to advance the gospel"

He said his imprisonment had given him the opportunity to preach to the imperial guard

Whether he was in prison or free, Paul's motivation was that Christ would be preached

"To live is Christ" certainly means sharing the message of the gospel and Paul was all about that as the book of Acts and his letters show - Paul would and did preach the gospel anytime, anywhere, and to anybody

But "to live is Christ" means more than sharing the gospel as it permeates and encompasses all of life

Paul's goal in life was to have those who saw him, see Christ

He wrote to the Corinthian church [**1Corinthians 11:1**] *"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."*

For a time, WWJD bracelets were all the rage and that truly is the lifestyle that "to live is Christ" indicates

"To live as Christ" means striving to have one's every word and action align with what Jesus would say and do in the same circumstance - to be a virtual clone of Christ

Notice that Paul didn't even care whether he lived or died as long as Christ was honored by it

Paul's entire motivation in life was Christ alone to bring him glory and to show people Jesus by his life and death

I'm pretty sure that Paul would have rather not been in prison

But he wasn't motivated by what he wanted - he was motivated by what he could do where he was to show Christ to those around him

He didn't care that people were trying to hurt him because his delight was that Christ was being preached

Paul was able to be joyful even in a terrible situation because he had the right motivation for living

Why we do what we do is important but we also need to consider why we are here and what is:

II. The proper purpose for life

Notice again how Paul begins with the words “for me”

Paul is making an emphatic, personal statement here - he feels very strongly about the point he is making in stating what his life is about

He is saying, in effect, “I can’t speak for you but this is what my life is all about. This is what makes life worth living for me.”

How do you think most people would complete Paul’s statement “For me to live is [blank]”?

Looking around at our society I think we could easily list some perennial favorites:

“Possessions”, “power”, “popularity”, and “pleasure”

Those four have long been the goal for many people

Then there is a new one that is becoming dominant of late, “privilege”

Competing for privilege has become so popular that a whole new way of determining who prevails through what is known as “intersectionality” had to be created

And the one who checks the most boxes gets to sit on top of the privilege pyramid - at least until some new measure is created

But it really just comes down to mankind’s ages old search for significance

Many others might well fill in the blank with “my family” or “my kids” or “my spouse” if only to appear less self-centered

Maybe, if a person is feeling super-spiritual they might even fill in the blank with “my ministry”

Can I clue you into something?

None of those things is permanent, they will all end, and none of them are worth living for - none of them is worthy of being elevated to the “essence of life” status

Notice again what Paul says in **Philippians 1:21** because it’s crucial that we get this right - he says:

For me to live is Christ

Paul’s purpose for living is the person of Jesus Christ

It’s not to labor for Christ, it’s not to talk about Christ, it’s not to sacrifice for Christ - it’s not about doing anything

Paul’s open secret to joyful living is that his purpose is a person; he lives for the person of Christ

Now, don’t misunderstand me here

One’s purpose will be lived out in their life and having Christ as one’s purpose will have tangible results in ministry and so forth

But we dare not allow those ancillary results to become our purpose

Let me illustrate what I mean here

Paul was a missionary church-planter, right?

Paul was passionate about taking the gospel into new territory

So much so that he writes in **Romans 15:20** that he:

“[made] it [his] ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest [he] build on someone else’s foundation.”

What happens to an itinerant church-planter when they are arrested and placed in chains in prison if their purpose is to travel and establish new churches?

Paul was passionate about spreading the gospel - there is no doubt about that - but the purpose of his life was Christ and that's why he spread the gospel as he did

So, when Paul found himself chained between two Roman guards in prison, he continued to live out his purpose in front of the guards so that it became known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest what Paul was about

And, because his purpose was Christ, he could rejoice that others were emboldened to preach the word without fear while his own activities were hindered

Paul's motivation was to reflect and honor Christ and his purpose of living was the person of Christ

And that's why he was able to continue as if nothing at all had changed with his imprisonment because, in reality, nothing significant had changed

And, as we look at the last part of the verse, we see that Paul knew that having Christ as his purpose was going to pay dividends beyond this life

III. The payoff in death

Again, Paul writes [**Philippians 1:21**]

*For me to live is Christ, **and to die is gain***

Paul continues in the verses that follow to describe how the reality of gain after death caused him to desire to depart

That doesn't indicate that Paul was suicidal; he's merely saying that what awaits him is attractive

The world views death as the end and, in many ways, it is

After all, if you are living for the temporal things of this world then death means the end of all that you've lived for

There is nothing else that you can plug into the formula of "for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

If for me to live is possessions to die is to leave them all behind

If for me to live is power to die is to be powerless in the extreme

If for me to live is popularity to die is to be forgotten

And so on

The only thing that you get more of when you die is Christ

But that's only true if you are living Christ now

And before anyone can live Christ they must first be in Christ - they must be living in union with Christ

Every person who is living in complete trust and dependence on Christ alone is a part of his body

Paul makes that point in **Ephesians 5:30** and he spends a good bit of time explaining how that works in 1Corinthians 12

Simply put, every believer, and only believers, are in union with Christ so only believers can honestly say "For me to live is Christ" - to "live Christ" you have to have given your life to Christ

The word "gain" that Paul uses here is a financial term indicating interest or dividends on an investment

And Paul shows us the reality that death for the believer is to collect both the principal and the interest and to have more of Christ in death than they do in life

But you need to know that Paul wasn't saying that gaining was reserved for death - he was enjoying Christ during his life as he lived Christ and he would gain even more at death

People often remark how Philippians is a letter overflowing with joy and how amazing it is that Paul could write such a letter considering the circumstances he found himself in

But Paul's secret was that his motivation, his purpose, and his reward were Christ

For Paul, circumstances didn't diminish his quality of life and he knew that things were only going to be better when he died because he would then be in the presence of Christ and experience him fully

In the course of my studies this week, I came across the account that I'd like to share with you

The story went like this:

A young man came to W. E. Gladstone when he was Prime Minister of England and said,

"Mr. Gladstone, I would appreciate your giving me a few minutes in which I might lay before you my plans for the future. I would like to study law."

"Yes," said the great statesman, "and **what then?**"

"Then, sir, I would like to gain entrance to the Bar of England."

"Yes, young man, and **what then?**"

"Then, sir, I hope to have a place in Parliament, in the House of Lords."

"Yes, young man, **what then?**" pressed Gladstone.

"Then I hope to do great things for Britain."

"Yes, young man, and **what then?**"

"Then, sir, I hope to retire and take life easy."

"Yes, young man, and **what then?**" he tenaciously asked.

"Well, then, Mr. Gladstone, I suppose I will die."

"Yes, young man, and **what then?**"

The young man hesitated and then said, "I never thought any further than that, sir."

Looking at the young man sternly and steadily, Gladstone said, "Young man, you are a fool. Go home and think life through!"

Conclusion

I don't know about you but Philippians 1:21 is convicting to me

I hate to admit how often I allow my own druthers and desires to determine what I do and don't do

I can relate to the hymnist who wrote, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it"

I would dare say each of us struggles with self-interest - if not frequently, then at least occasionally

Living for self is a hard temptation to overcome

Perhaps that's because we can live for self so easily by doing a whole lot and by doing nothing

Striving to have others notice us and give us accolades or conserving our strength and coasting along

And even when we try to live Christ, believers are prone to wander and are always in danger of moving away from Christ to "Christianity" - from relationship to religion

And we can be tempted to add to our formula to say "For me to live is Christ plus [fill in the blank]" thinking that we are helping our cause

But Christ alone is to be our motivation and our purpose and our reward

So, let's go back to consider Alice's inquiry from our earlier illustration and ask, "Where do you want to get to?"

Author Steven Covey in his best-selling book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People said that Habit #2 was, "Begin with the end in mind"

What he meant by that was pretty much the same thing that the Cheshire Cat was driving at with Alice - you need to know where you want to wind up in order to travel there effectively

Without a clear destination, you will wind up somewhere but probably not where you would like to be

Do you want satisfaction and joy in this life?

Do you want a rewarding existence now that promises even more in the next life?

Do you want peace in spite of circumstances?

Do you want to be able to face death, not with fear and dread, but with eagerness anticipation?

Then mind how you complete the phrase, "For me to live is [blank]"

Because only Christ will cause you to fully enjoy the journey and get you where you want to be

Let's pray

Philippians 1:12-21 (page 980)

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the 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. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.