

“When We Don’t Agree”

Philippians 1:12-18a

October 25, 2009

Last Monday night I was watching *Nightline* on TV, and I listened to an interview with a Christian preacher of whom—how shall I phrase this?—a preacher of whom I am not particularly fond. That is putting it mildly. I know that all of you would like to know who that person is, but I’m not going to tell you because he is not the subject of this sermon. The subject of this sermon is the attitude that God wants us to have toward Christians of whom we are not particularly fond.

Can you think of some believer in Christ of whom you are not particularly fond? Does anybody come to your mind? It may be some Christian that you have seen on TV or heard on the radio. Perhaps it is somebody who is a part of this church.

How does God want you to think about that person? If you occasionally find yourself in circumstances where you actually have to rub shoulders with that person, how are you going to act toward that individual? How do we live with Christians with whom we don’t agree?

This is not a new problem. It’s an issue that the apostle Paul encountered way back in the first century. In Philippians 1:12-18, Paul describes his attitude toward some Christians who are giving him trouble. Paul’s words are truly remarkable. Every time I read this passage in Philippians I am astounded by what Paul says. In fact, the older I get and the more I witness certain things going on within the church of Jesus Christ, the more amazed I am by what Paul says.

Think about Paul’s situation as he writes this letter. First, Paul is in Rome, and he is in prison. The year is somewhere between A.D. 60 and 62. We know from the book of Acts that Paul was confined in Rome for two years (Acts 28:30). We also know from Acts that before Paul had been taken to Rome to stand trial before Caesar, he had first been arrested in Jerusalem and then imprisoned in the city of Caesarea for two years (Acts 24:27). No matter how fine a person Paul is and no matter how strong Paul is in his faith, those events have to eat at him just a little! Then on top of his imprisonment there are some Christians in the city of Rome who are giving him a hard time. Verse 17 summarizes the problem: “[These people] preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”

What a situation to find yourself in! Yet amazingly Paul faces his circumstances without bitterness or anger. He’s positive! He is confident in God, and he is even thankful as he thinks about these people who are stirring up trouble for him. We need to take a good hard look at what he says. We need to learn from him. We need to learn how to live with Christians with whom we do not agree.

Stand firm for the message of the gospel

The first thing that we need to do in order to understand Paul’s attitude is to recognize that he is not always positive toward everything or everybody. We can be more precise than that. Paul is not hesitant or afraid to oppose people who twist and distort the message of Jesus Christ. They may talk about Jesus and say all kinds of pleasant things about him, but that is not enough. Look at what Paul says later on in this letter to the Philippians.

² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— . . . (Phil. 3:2-3)

Who is Paul talking about in those verses? Obviously he is talking about a different group of people than he was discussing in chapter 1 because his attitude is entirely different. These people are usually referred to as the Judaizers. (That is a modern name used to describe them; nobody called them by that name back in the first century.) They were people who believed in

Jesus but who also said that faith in Jesus was not enough. It wasn't enough simply to trust in Jesus. A man also had to go through the Jewish rite of circumcision and then follow other Jewish customs. If those requirements were not met, then you couldn't become a Christian. You could not claim that you had been forgiven by God or had become a member of his divine family unless you followed the Jewish law. Faith in Jesus Christ was not enough.

Paul will not accept that teaching. These people sound kind of like Christians. They do talk about Jesus. But they undercut the uniqueness of the gospel message by saying that Jesus' death upon the cross was not sufficient for salvation. Paul will not stomach anyone who says that kind of thing. "Watch out for those dogs," he says, "those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh."

Here's what we need to learn from Paul's example: There is a time when we need to *stand firm for the message of the gospel*. No compromises. No "Mr. Nice Guy." There comes a time when a line needs to be drawn. This is truth and this isn't. A stand needs to be taken. No apologies.

On Thursday of this week I was driving over to Grand Rapids to participate in a ministerial licensing interview, and I switched on Minnesota Public Radio. An author was being interviewed about his latest book. He said that his goal was to rescue the church from two errors. He wanted to rescue the church from the error of atheism and the error of theism. Atheism is the belief that there is no God. He didn't want the church to fall into that mistake. I think that most of us would agree with him about that! But he also said that he wanted to rescue the church from theism. Theism is simply the belief that God exists. This man wanted to rescue the church from God! He went on to explain that the God that is portrayed in the Bible is unacceptable to people today, so we need to get rid of him and replace him with some other kind of spiritual power. What do you think that the apostle Paul would have said about that idea?

There is a message that we cannot compromise. We need to stand firm for the message of the gospel. The good news that the New Testament tells us about revolves around Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that he miraculously came from God, and his major purpose on the earth was to hang on the cross. He died that excruciating death not as an unwilling victim, but as a volunteer. When Jesus was crucified, he was paying the price for sin. He was taking on himself the punishment that all of us deserve for the way that we have disobeyed God. Jesus paid the full price! Through his Son Jesus, God did everything necessary so that you and I can have our sins forgiven and enter into a vital relationship with him. All that you and I are asked to do is to entrust ourselves to Jesus. We say, "God, I have not been all that you want me to be. I admit it. I need to be forgiven by you for what I've done. So I'm telling you right now that I am counting on what Jesus did on that cross to take care of my sins. I believe that Jesus died on the cross in my place. I deserved to be punished, but he took my punishment for me. I am entrusting my life and my very existence to Jesus. I am counting on him alone to make me acceptable to you." That's the good news! That's the message that we cannot compromise!

It is also a message that each and every one of us needs to take to heart. This is not just a mental exercise. We don't just say, "Oh, yeah, that sounds good. I'm with you." No, the question is whether you and I have actually said those things to God. Don't settle for just a bunch of words. Have you ever taken your life and said, "God, here I am. I am all yours. I'm counting on Jesus to make me right with you, and I want to serve him from now on"?

That's the message of the gospel, and we need to stand firm for it.

Distinguish between essentials and non-essentials

But we can't stop there. We need stand firm for the message of the gospel, but then we also need to learn to *distinguish between the essentials and the non-essentials*. Look again at what Paul writes to the Philippians.

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. (Phil. 1:15-18)

Who is Paul talking about in those verses? Paul doesn't identify them for us so we can't be sure, but we can make an educated guess from the clues that he drops here and there. These people are probably Christians who think that Paul has damaged the message of Jesus Christ by getting himself arrested. They might be saying something like this: "It really is sad that Paul got himself arrested. If Paul hadn't done been so foolhardy over in Jerusalem—if he hadn't been so set on going up to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, he would never have been arrested. But since he was arrested and has brought here to Rome, all of the rest of us Christians have to be more cautious. Otherwise, we'll get arrested too! So we better keep this guy Paul at arms' length. Just in case the Romans are watching, let's make it real clear to everybody that we've got nothing to do with him!"¹

Can you imagine someone saying that? Do you see where that line of reasoning can lead? At first, it's just maintaining a safe distance from Paul. But after a while, the fears grow and intensify. A sense of rivalry develops. "Are you with that guy Paul or are you with us? Don't waste your time on him. His best days of ministry are over and done with. Come and work with us, not him."

How does Paul respond? "But what does it matter? Who cares what anybody thinks about me? I'm not the issue. It's not about me! The important thing is that the message about Jesus and his death for sin keeps getting spread around."

What an amazing statement! I really am astounded by it. It's only natural that when you and I have worked hard at something, you want a little recognition. It's not that you want an awards banquet to be held in your honor. Just a simple acknowledgment that you've worked hard is enough. But Paul says, "Nope. I don't even need that. As long as the good news of Jesus keeps moving forward. That's enough."

Paul knows how to distinguish between that which is essential—the gospel of Christ—and that which is non-essential—Paul himself. We need to learn that lesson too. We cannot compromise the essential message about Jesus, but we can compromise on the non-essentials. Think about all the things that we Christians tend to disagree about—how people should be baptized, how Bible prophecy should be interpreted, or how we should understand the "days" recorded in Genesis 1. We sometimes get into intense discussions over what Bible translation is best or what kind of music we should sing in our worship services. We can argue whether the United States is a Christian nation or not or whether women should serve as elders and pastors.

Please understand! I am not suggesting for a moment that we should not talk about those issues. There is a place for all of those discussions, but they should not occupy the first place on the church's agenda. The first place always belongs to Jesus and his good news.

Centuries ago this principle was summarized in a memorable way: "In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."² That puts it so well.

Rejoice in God's ability to overcome our limitations.

There is something else that we need to notice in Paul's words. As I said earlier, in spite of his circumstances Paul is positive. He's in Rome. He's in prison. Some of the Christians in

¹ This is an adaptation of the view proposed by D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 25.

² For the history of this proverbial saying, see John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 118-119.

the city don't want to have anything to do with him. They have purposely separated themselves from him. But still Paul is positive as he faces the future. Why?

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. (Phil. 1:12-14)

Paul understands and has experienced God's ability to overcome human limitations. So in spite of his circumstances he rejoices. Paul has learned to *rejoice in God's ability to overcome our limitations*. He looks at what is happening around him. Yes, some of the Christians in Rome have turned against him because of his imprisonment, but good things have happened too. The palace guards who are assigned to Paul have learned about him and, more importantly, they've learned about his Lord too. The message about Jesus has spread through the Praetorian Guard. And other Christians in Rome have witnessed Paul's courage, and they, in turn, have been encouraged to take a stronger public stand for Jesus. God has already overcome some of the limitations that Paul's imprisonment has placed upon him. That's what Paul has learned through his experience. So he is confident that God will continue to work no matter what other Christians may think of him or what may happen to him in prison. Paul rejoices in God's ability to overcome human limitations. We need to learn to rejoice like that too.

Conclusion

Let's not underestimate what the lessons of this passage in Philipians will cost us. It's easy for us to assume that Paul mastered these lessons with just a flick on some internal spiritual switch. But I think that we can be sure that it didn't happen that way. It hurts to be opposed or ignored or dismissed as unimportant.

It takes work to keep out attitudes in line with what God wants. All of us here get attached to certain things about the church or to certain teachings that have been meaningful to us but that are not really essential. To distinguish between what is essential and what isn't will mean that we have to put aside some things that we cherish. That's hard. We can spot other people who have misplaced their priorities, but it is harder for us to see that in ourselves.

To internalize the idea that God can work over and above human limitations does not come naturally either. Think of some Christian that you are not particularly fond of. It may be some well-known leader of a Christian ministry, or it may be someone here in our community or in our church. You have had a disagreement with this person. Maybe you have gotten into a debate with this person over one of those issues that I mentioned earlier. Maybe there is just something about the person that irks you.

Can you say to God, "Lord, I believe that you can overcome that person's limitations in order to accomplish your purpose"? Don't say that too quickly! Think about it before you say it. Do you really believe that God can use that person with whom you have such serious disagreements?

Then are you willing to take another step? Will you pray for that person? "God, I pray that you will overcome that person's limitations. Please, O Lord, use that person for the spread of your message of good news!" Again, don't just piously mouth those words.

And, finally, it might be a good idea to add another request to your prayer. "Lord, please overcome all of the limitations and weaknesses that you see in my life too. In spite of how often I let you down, please use me too."