

“A Believable Gospel”
Philippians 2:12-16
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The story has been told often but it so perfectly, though negatively, illustrates the text before us today that it bears repeating.

It was the right hook that got him.

Pastor Waite might have stood in front of the communion table trading punches with head deacon Ray Brison all morning had not Ray's fist caught (the pastor) on the chin two minutes and 15 seconds into the fight.

Pastor Waite went down for the count right there at the altar.

Two of the pastor's teeth were loosened and Deacon Ray Bryson's hand was broken in two places.

Nothing in the history of that rather typical New England community on the outskirts of Boston could have prepared them for that Sunday morning donnybrook.

The church had been in the community for generations.

Following W.W.II it had prided itself on being a defense against the forces of compromise and worldliness in Christianity.

And when the Jewish community began to grow and the Baptist population began to sink, they developed a motto that read "God is with US at Emanuel Baptist" with the US in bold letters).

Through a great deal of sin on the part of the pastor and some on the part of the lay leadership, the pastor and the deacons divided into two camps with the deacons calling for the pastor's resignation.

Most of the congregation chose sides as well.

When the deacon chairman, contrary to the pastors' wishes, walked to the platform to announce a business meeting to terminate the

pastor, Pastor Waite wouldn't give him the microphone and proceeded to announce a hymn.

At that, Ray the deacon, pulled the microphone cord out of the wall and turned to walk away, but tripped on the cord.

When Pastor Waite reached to help him up, Ray thinking he had been tripped, swung and hit the Pastor squarely in the nose.

Within an instant a majority of the congregation converged on the communion table and began exchanging punches with members from both sides of the aisle.

The organist tried playing "Bless Be the Tie that Binds" to get everyone to stop, but to no avail.

The fight ended when the police arrived.

The following Wednesday, the deacons and the pastor were in court sitting in uncomfortable silence when the judge, a prominent Jew came into the room.

The judge looked up from the report in front of him and said, "I'm dismissing this case.

No charges will be pressed but I'm urging you to work this out in your own church.

Your Jesus may allow this sort of thing in His followers but I will not allow fistfights as a regular order of service in churches in my town.

The leadership of the church filed out quietly and drove off in their cars bearing the bumper stickers: "God is with US at Emanuel Baptist".

Though physical punches were never again thrown - the verbal punches continued and it was only a very few years before the church folded altogether. (From Colson's [The Body](#))

Though the actions are so exaggerated that they are funny, the truth is that they are tragic when we consider the reputation of a church and the credibility of the gospel.

It's akin to the damage the Abu Graib prison photos did to the credibility of the U.S. as "liberators" of Iraq.

The wrong actions of some don't necessarily change the rightness of a cause but they can do irreparable damage to how that cause is perceived.

Now the point: How we think and act toward one another in the church has far-reaching consequences.

Philippians 2:12-16

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold out the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing."

Most sentences and paragraphs have many adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases that modify the main subjects, objects and verbs.

In the midst of those modifiers we can sometimes lose sight of the main point.

In the two sentences that form our text for today I want you to see the thrust of Paul's admonition:

"Therefore, my dear friends...continue to work out your salvation... Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure...as you hold out the word of life..."

Paul calls on them to act in a certain way so that a specific result will follow.

Paul calls on those he loves (literally "my loved ones") to act in a certain way ("work out your salvation...do everything without complaining or arguing") so a specific result will follow ("you

may become blameless and pure...as you hold out the word of life...”).

Before we look at the main idea more closely, I want you to see that Paul begins this paragraph with the word “therefore.”

Quite obviously what Paul writes after that is built in some way on what he has already written.

Last week as we looked at the description of Jesus that Paul gave in verses 6-11, I reminded you that Paul goes beyond his immediate purpose in so grandly and broadly describing Jesus.

It’s as if he is on theme and then in the midst of it goes off on a marvelous tangent of worship.

But his main purpose in writing about Jesus at that point was Jesus’ exemplary life of humility – a humility that we are called to.

Paul began this whole section of his letter back in chapter one.

As we read that earlier section I want you to see the similarities to the text we are looking at today.

Paul writes in 1:27-2:5

”Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel... make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...”

At that point Paul launched into the description of Jesus that we looked at last week.

As I said, while Paul went beyond his main point in the description, he certainly made his point – we are called to be like Jesus in our attitudes and actions toward each other.

Jesus was an example of the **main point** Paul is making.

Again, I want you to see the similarities between what Paul wrote in 1:27 with what he picks up again in 2:12, 16:

1:27 "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel."

2:12,16 "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation...as you hold out the word of life..."

- In both sections he speaks of his relationship to them whether he is with them or absent from them.
- In both sections he uses a phrase that speaks generally of the way they are to act as Christians: "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" and "as you have always obeyed...continue to work out your salvation".
- And in both sections he speaks of result of their conduct: "contending as one man for the faith of the gospel" and "hold(ing) out the word of life."

It seems clear to me that after the example of Jesus in verses 6-11 Paul is now back to his main point.

So why does Paul repeat himself?

Because this time he adds some specificity he didn't include earlier.

Looking now more closely at 2:12-16, Paul calls on those he loves to act in a certain way so a specific result will follow.

I want to take this in reverse order starting with the result that will follow obedience to this instruction.

Acting toward each other with Jesus' humble, putting-others-first results in a believable gospel.

Here again is the way Paul writes it: 2:15-16 "so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing."

Paul's mind is saturated with the language of the OT.

In these words he draws from several OT passages to make his point.

The first is from Deuteronomy 32:5 where we read that the Israelites “acted corruptly toward (God); to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation.”

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses called the Israelites “a warped and crooked generation.”

Here, in contrast, Paul says the Philippians live in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation.

In Deuteronomy, Moses said the Israelites have acted corruptly and are no longer God’s children.

Here, in contrast, Paul says the Philippians should be “blameless and pure, children of God without fault...”

Paul is not saying they have to be perfect before they can have any impact on those around them.

He is saying that how they think and act towards each other makes the gospel believable or unbelievable.

“Blameless” and “without fault” have to do with the way others see them.

As Peter said it in 1 Peter 2:12: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

When Paul says they are to be “Pure” he is writing of their intentions. He wants their attitudes to be consistent with their actions.

They are not to be doing one thing but thinking another – a kind of reverse hypocrisy.

Paul says in 2:15-16 “you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.”

I said Paul was steeped in OT language and it comes out again here:

Paul draws from Daniel 12:3 “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

- Isaiah said it this way: Isaiah 49:6 “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”
- Jesus said it this way: Matthew 5:16 “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.
- And John 17:23 “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me...”

And the point here is that our attitudes and actions toward one another as Christians affect not only us but also affect how unbelievers think of us, how they think of the gospel and ultimately how they think of Jesus himself.

As the judge near Boston put it to the pastor and deacons of Emmanuel Baptist Church: “Your Jesus may allow this sort of thing in His followers but I will not allow fistfights as a regular order of service in the churches in my town.

As those who do not yet know Jesus walk into this place and watch us interact, what might they conclude about Jesus?

As neighbors and co-workers and unbelieving family members hear us talk about other Christians, or other churches what might they conclude about the gospel?

Only as we increasingly act like Jesus by humbly placing the interests of others ahead of our own interests will our telling of the good news of Jesus have any impact.

But in the text before us Paul is not speaking just generally about being nice, humble Christians who put each other first.

Working backwards in the text from the results to the specific behavior that Paul has in mind we read:

Philippians 2: 14 “**Do everything without complaining or arguing,**

Apparently in the church at Philippi there were Christians at odds with each other.

- Later Paul would write, Philippians 4:2 “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”
- Earlier he wrote, Philippians 2:2 “make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”

Self-centeredness is the opposite of the humble putting-others-first attitude, which we are called to have.

That self-centeredness can evidence itself in many ways but Paul specifically notes complaining and arguing.

The word “complaining” is the same as the Greek translation of the OT Hebrew word for “grumbling.”

And it is evident from the context that Paul is not talking about their grumbling against God or Paul but against each other.

Complaining against each other has to do with finding fault with each other rather than forgiving.

Arguing with each other has to do with nitpicking over disagreements; spending time finding the ways we disagree rather than the ways we agree.

Wasting our emotional energy and time on issues that don't really matter.

And such complaining and arguing only further nurture a negative attitude.

We become petty, nitpicking, argumentative, and separated.

Faultfinding is a disease resulting from arrogance!

We are so “right” and so self-protective that can't allow that we might be wrong.

And a complaining, arguing, negative, faultfinding person in the company of others of the same ilk will destroy a church's ability to do the work God has called us to do.

That brings us back to the first of Paul's words in our text:

Philippians 2:12-13 “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in

my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

When I think about the impact God says our relationships with each other as believers have on unbelievers around us AND I think of how easily we fall into faultfinding and argumentative attitudes and actions, I could despair of the church ever being able to witness effectively to the power of the gospel to change lives.

But Paul begins his remarks with a term of great endearment – “my dear friends.”

Actually Paul’s words are more literally – “my dearly loved ones.”

As the entire book demonstrates, Paul is not taking “pot shots” from a distance at people he barely knows or cares little about.

He knows them well and cares for them deeply – he loves them.

And in his love for them he longs for them to imitate Jesus in their actions and attitudes **toward each other** for their sake and the sake of the gospel.

He longs for them to have an effective witness among unbelievers in their city.

He wants it to be true of them as one unbeliever in history said of the early Christians: “My, how they love one another.”

That is what I want:

- I want to be part of a church, a people, who increasingly reflect Jesus in attitude and conduct.
- I want us to truly love each other.
- I know that takes time and energy.

I know that will mean other self-centered things may need to go.

It may not be only about **my** work, **my** hobbies, **my** vacations, what **I** like to do, how **I** want to spend my money, or other.

It will look like people who hold their tongues, who forgive, who make a concerted effort to reach out to each other and engage each other.

And so Paul says whether I am with you or not I want you to **“work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”**

Now don't get “hung up” on this wording.

Paul does not say work “for” or “toward” or “at” your salvation **as if by what you do you can get it** or retain it.

Paul says “work OUT your salvation” as in living out what is already there by God's grace.

Through the centuries many have misunderstood God's grace to the point that they miss it altogether.

If you remember the motion picture “The Mission” you probably recall actor Robert DeNiro pulling a heavy load of junk armor up the rocks beside the waterfalls that led to the upper jungles where the missionary work was being carried out.

All of his effort was for the purpose of doing penance for having killed his younger brother.

When he had finally suffered sufficiently, when he had done enough penance, then he was freed of the heavy load, symbolic of his being forgiven for his sin.

That is the religion of most of the world.

As I said last week, it is the thinking that says, “You sin, you pay!”

But that is not the teaching of the Bible either OT or NT.

A right standing with God, forgiveness, is by grace through faith, not works, not penance.

“Work out your salvation” is not about how we earn a relationship with God.

In this text it is about how we live out our relationship with God in our dealings with each other.

“Work out your salvation” is another way that Paul defines “obey.”
Obedience is not the source of our faith but it is the evidence of it.

And to work out our salvation “with fear and trembling” means with a proper respect for God and the consequences of our conduct.

This is serious business – the credibility of the gospel is at stake here.

Our mission both here at home and around the world is helping people become faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul’s point, repeating Jesus, is that our relationships with each other make us more or less effective in fulfilling that mission.

We must take our relationships with each other in the church very seriously.

And now to the good news:

Verse 13 “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

This is great encouragement!!

Reading verse 12 alone, we might get the idea that we are on our own to obey – that we must muster up the necessary will and ability to do what is right.

But Paul says remember that God is on your side – he enables what he desires.

God supplies the power.

And he supplies the spiritual energy not only to do what is right but to first of all to want to.

To the Romans he spoke of being “transformed by the renewing of the mind.” Romans 12:2

This is a change from the inside out.

It is not merely compliance with a set of rules but is a transformed will.

Verse 13 sounds like God does it.

Verse 12 sounds like we do it.

Which is it?

Paul is not embarrassed to say both are true.

In fact time and time again in the Scriptures God speaks of his ability and our responsibility – of his enabling and our obedience.

The Apostle Paul often used the combination of commanding something within the context of what God has already provided.

Or in other words he says, “Here is what you ought to do in the light of what God has already done or is doing.”

Notice in the following verses how a command for obedience flows out of what God has already done:

- Colossians 3:12 “Therefore, **as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved**, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.
- Romans 12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, **in view of God's mercy**, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices
- Ephesians 4:1 “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

This is God working in us to enable us to work – it is all of God even though we respond to what he does.

It doesn't mean that God is doing it for us but that God supplies the necessary empowerment.

There is a tendency among Christians to go to one extreme or the other of a kind of legalistic hyperactivity or a “let go and let God” passivity.

- Either we think of Christianity as what **we** must do to **maintain** a relationship with God whereby he will let us into heaven when we die.
- Or we think of Christianity as being all about waiting for God to move us to right actions.

Just trust that God loves you and do what you feel like doing.

But Paul seems to be unafraid of stressing both grace and obedience.

It is all of grace but grace produces obedience.

The truth is God has already acted and is acting even now whether we feel it or not.

We are to trust God and act.

We are to get busy living out the implications of our faith knowing that God acts in us enabling us each step of the way.

I love Paul's understanding and statement of this in

Colossians 1:28-29 "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Paul says so much is at stake in our relationships with each other.

A complaining, critical, negative, argumentative, quarrelsome spirit will discredit the very gospel we claim.

But how do we change?

- First of all we must take the issue seriously; I need my negative, critical attitude to change.
- Then, I need to recognize that this is a spiritual issue – a transformation of my heart is necessary.
- Thirdly, I must acknowledge and trust that God is already at work giving me the ability to change both on the inside and outside – both in attitude and action.
- Lastly, I need to act, trusting God to enable me as I obey.

It is still as simple and as profound as "trust and obey."

"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which **you** shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life..."