



Christian Crusaders

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Living the Jesus Life: Be a Good Citizen

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TEXT: Philippians 1:27-30 (ESV)

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Dear friends,

I love being a citizen of the United States. Yes, it has its flaws, but those flaws are few in comparison to the benefits and blessings I've received as a citizen. As you know, part of being a citizen is not only receiving blessings and privileges, it also involves responsibility and duty. It means paying taxes, participating in our community, serving our country, and being respectful and honest. Participate in the country.

I have a dual citizenship, by the way. Maybe you do too. Anyone who is a believer in Jesus Christ has another citizenship far greater than any other. It's heavenly citizenship. And, as a citizen of God's kingdom, I also have received many spiritual blessings and privileges that I enjoy: a restored relationship with God, forgiveness for my sins, a cleansed conscience, the promise of eternity. And I also have duties and responsibilities as a citizen of this heavenly kingdom. That's what the apostle Paul tells us in our passage for today from Philippians.

Let me just set this up for you little bit: Paul's been telling these folks of how he's rejoicing because the gospel's advancing, even where he is, and he's in a prison in Rome. He reports in his letter that he's been using his uncomfortable circumstances to bring Christ Jesus to the soldiers guarding him and that the whole Praetorian Guard has now heard about Jesus from Paul. And not only that, the Christians in Rome who had been kind of shy are now sharing the gospel of Christ more boldly, as they're inspired by Paul. And Paul tells these Philippians that he's all in when it comes to the gospel, "for to me to live is Christ, to die is gain."

Now he turns the conversation away from himself, today, in this passage to the Philippian Christians (and to us as well) as he writes, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel; conduct yourselves in a way that honors Jesus your King and represents Him well in this world of ours." Paul was actually talking citizenship. The verb, "let your manner of life be", is literally "live as citizens". Live as citizens worthy of the gospel, he says, the gospel of Christ. He's telling us it's important to conduct ourselves as good citizens of the kingdom of Christ. We're His representatives in the world. You do that, first of all, with your character, and then also with your conduct. Paul keeps going, he says

Conduct yourself this way so that whether I come to you or am absent I may hear these things about you. That you are living life in a manner worthy of the gospel; that you're living like our king Jesus would live, with a loving attitude, with kindness, and mercy, and grace, and truthfulness, and goodness, and integrity, and humility, and compassion towards others, and obedience to the great commandment to love God and love neighbor. Because how you act does say a lot, it tells the real story.

He says it's also a continual standing firm in striving for the faith of the gospel. We're to be evangelistic, called to spread the gospel of Jesus to other people. To intentionally, boldly, and gently sprinkle our conversations with others about Jesus and what He did for us at the cross and tomb. To tell others the good news of God's kingdom plan of salvation. To invite people to turn to Christ and receive the forgiveness of sins. Paul says as you're doing those two things, it's so important that you do them together, as the church. It's too hard to do this alone. He says, "I want to hear that you're standing firm in one spirit, striving side-by-side for the faith of the gospel." That striving side-by-side is a term from the world of athletics. He's talking teamwork — everyone working together as a team for the advancement of the gospel in your community. We need to stay connected to one another, doing His work together, not only as a show of strength, but it's a source of needed strength and encouragement as each of us goes with the gospel into our neighborhoods and various community settings.

Paul says,

I want to hear that you're not afraid of anything, of your opponents who want to shut you up and shut you down. I want to hear that you haven't clammed up about the good news for fear of what might happen to you, but that you've stood strong for Christ. I want to hear stories about your courage towards pressure and threats.

We need ask who these opponents of the gospel are that he's talking about, and also do we have opponents like that today? All these opponents that, in all likelihood, that Paul was talking about, were the locals who bowed to Caesar as their lord. They had other gods they worshiped as well, and the people that were in power could make life hard on those who insist that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. They could accuse them of sedition against the state, and persecute them. They could reject them, and ridicule them, and have them treated as outcasts. It still happens today, there are people who reject and ridicule the gospel and the people of Christ, calling our gospel nothing but a fairytale religion, trouble for all concerned. This faith of ours still has opponents in states, and countries, and of course other religions that consider Christians as infidels. And we even hear from atheists that this world would be so much better off without any religion at all, it should just be outlawed. They tell us to be quiet. There's also Satan. In Ephesians Paul reminds Christians that, as we strive to serve Jesus in the world, we're fighting not so much against flesh and blood, but principalities, and cosmic evil powers, temptations, trials, and suffering. Peter, in his letter, talks to the devil as a roaring lion, seeking to devour those of us who are citizens of the kingdom. Paul says,

Why do this? Why stand strong and courageous? Because this is a clear sign to them, who are opposing you, of their destruction and your salvation from God. It's your witness. As people see you stand strong, and persevering in your faith, they'll know that this gospel must be of God, and that maybe they'd better think twice about opposing or rejecting that which could lead to destruction for themselves.

And it sends a strong message to Satan, "Satan, you're defeated! Your end is coming soon! Jesus is Lord, not you! The kingdom of God has won and you are doomed!" Jesus said to Peter, upon his confession of belief in Jesus as the son of the living God, "Upon this rock I will build my church. And the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it."

Paul says as you live a manner of life worthy of the gospel, it carries with it the possibility of suffering for the sake of Christ. You're signing up to suffer. You're saying, "I'm willing to suffer for Jesus." Paul had experience suffering firsthand, and he knew that faithful, obedient followers of Jesus would suffer as well. Listen to what he says here: "It has been granted that you should not only believe in Christ for your salvation, but suffer for His sake, being engaged in the same conflict that I'm having." Notice Paul

here seems to be saying that suffering for Christ's sake is a gift, a privilege. He wasn't alone. In Acts 5, we're told that the apostles, after they'd been arrested and been beaten by the Sanhedrin council, rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for Christ's name.

What does suffering for Jesus look like today? Does it still happen? Well, we know there are parts of the world where you will suffer for your Christian faith: persecution in China, and the Near [Middle] East, and Africa. We read of persecution of Christians in the 'Voice of the Martyrs' reports that we receive on the internet. It's tough out there in other parts of the world for Christians who are trying to represent Christ. But how about countries like the United States, is there suffering? Well, in comparison there's not much suffering, not like that. Maybe some cynicism and skepticism of others toward you, or some will ridicule you, or view you as less than intelligent or open-minded. I've been called "narrow-minded" as I preach that Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. People respond to me sometimes, "Come on, you're being arrogant, narrow-minded, and intolerant. I thought you were smarter than that." But, real suffering for Christ? I can't think of ever being seriously abused, or persecuted, or beaten for my faith in Jesus.

So this begs the question: Paul says that "is been granted to you, suffer for the sake of the Gospel"; how do you and I suffer for the sake of the Gospel in a country that has religious freedom? In my sphere of influence there probably is not physical suffering, like other parts of the world, for the faith. But there is suffering that I'm called to right where I live, suffering for the sake of the Gospel. There's an old word that comes to mind; long-suffering. It's used in the King James version of Bible. Some people, you see, are difficult to love and serve. You know what I'm talking about. They can be mean and ungrateful, they can be just hard to tolerate. Long-suffering is a commitment to patiently keep on loving and serving that person (or persons) in the name of Jesus, no matter what. To get them into the kingdom, you suffer. There is suffering that can occur when I willingly choose to be different, holy, and set apart for God. Because I want to be obedient to Christ, I decide I won't run people down with gossip at the office, or participate in it, or laugh at coarse jokes. I won't swear or curse in order to be one of the crowd. I won't reject the outcast in my school or at the nursing home who sits alone in the dining room, but instead I'll go sit with them and befriend them at the risk of being scoffed at by others. I won't sell out on my Christian values to fit in with the crowd. I won't hate others because they don't happen to believe as I do, or have the same color of skin as mine, or the same lifestyle. All of this can make people view you as acting "holier than thou" and being judgmental. And so you just might suffer some loneliness for this Christ-like conduct, and some emotional pain, as you find yourself left out, or singled out, or avoided.

Did you know we suffer when we show compassion to others? Brennan Manning, in his book "Glimpse of Jesus", writes, "We live the passion of Jesus through a life of compassion." And then he explains the etymology of the word "compassion" lies in two Latin words, "com" and "patior", meaning to suffer with, to endure with, to struggle with, and to partake of the hunger, nakedness, loneliness, pain, and broken dreams of our brothers and sisters in the human family. Commitment to Christ without compassion for His people is a lie.

Let me tell you a story about Joe:

Joe was a drunk, miraculously converted in a street outreach mission. He had a real reputation before his conversion, as a wino for whom there was hope. But following his conversion to Christ, everything changed. He became the most caring person at the mission. He was compassionate. He spent his days doing what needed to be done. There was never anything he was asked to do that he considered beneath him. Whether it was cleaning up vomit left by a sick alcoholic, or scrubbing toilets after men had left them filthy, Joe did it with a heart of gratitude. He could be counted on to feed any man who wandered in off the streets, compassionately undress and tuck them into bed when they were too out of it take care themselves. One evening after the mission director delivered his evangelistic message to the usual crowd, one of them looked up, came down the altar, kneeled to pray, crying out for God to help them change. The repentant drunk kept shouting, "Oh God, make me like Joe, make me like Joe!" The director leaned over and said, "Son, wouldn't it be better if you prayed, 'make me like Jesus'?" And after thinking about it few moments, the man looked up with an inquisitive expression and asked the director, "Is He like Joe?" Do others see Jesus in you? Compassion that's ready to suffer alongside them? Of course, being open about your faith in conversations with others and bringing up Jesus in social settings might cause you to suffer a bit of uncomfortableness: you're ridiculed or looked askance at. Of course, there is the suffering that comes when loved ones walk away from the gospel and salvation. You've poured your lives into bringing your kids up in the faith. I've talked with many a broken-hearted Christian parent who raised their children in the faith, and now these children have rejected the faith of their parents. These parents suffer as they try to reason with the kids, as they pray for their return, and worry about their salvation. I don't know if there's any suffering that's greater than that.

So, as we think of living lives that might involve suffering, suffering as a citizen of Heaven for the sake of the gospel shouldn't probably surprise us. After all, we follow One who suffered on the cross for us first, to rescue us and make us citizens of His kingdom, that we might receive all the benefits and blessings of Heaven. And

remember that He said something about following Him and living the Jesus life, one day. He said, "If anyone would be My disciple, let them take up his cross and follow Me. For he who saves his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake, and the gospel, will save it."

My fellow citizens in Christ: may our manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our Savior is counting on us.

Amen.