

# *A Life Worthy of the Gospel*

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany – February 3/4, 2007

### Sermon Background Study

*Colossians 3:1-2 (NRSV)*

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, . . .

*Matthew 6:33 (NRSV)*

<sup>33</sup>But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

*Philippians 1:27 (NRSV)*

<sup>27</sup>Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, . . .

*We proclaim to all who will listen the glorious Good News of Jesus Christ. But do we lead lives worthy of this proclamation? As the apostle Paul puts it, Do we “shine like stars in the world?”*

One image from last week’s background study has stuck with me. It’s Curly, aka Jack Palance, perched high on his horse holding up one finger as he tells Billy Crystal that the secret to life is “one thing.” Thus, I chuckled aloud when I opened Morna Hooker’s commentary<sup>1</sup> on Philippians to begin work on this study. Here is her opening sentence on the section of Paul’s letter to the Philippians that begins at 1:27:

“The opening word, (*monon*, “only,” as in the NRSV) indicates the move to exhortation: “There is just one thing!”

Like minds perhaps. The cowboy Curly and the apostle Paul? At least they both know the importance of having “one thing.” I don’t really know what’s on Curly’s mind, but Paul tells us exactly what he has in mind.

Paul urges the Philippian Christians to recognize that the “one thing” is to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The NIV translators put it this way: “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” N.T. Wright renders it this way: “The one thing I would stress is this: our public behavior must match up to the gospel of the king.” Here’s Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase: “Meanwhile, live in such a way that you are a credit to the Message of Christ.”

#### A Public Gospel

The word “gospel” translates the Greek, *evangelion*. It is sometimes translated “good news” or “glad tidings.”

In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus’ day, *evangelion* was not a church word, nor did it have particularly religious connotations. It was simply a word of public proclamation for a big joyous event, such as the birth of the emperor’s heir, the enthroning of a new emperor, or a great military victory. This proclamation of good news, this *evangelion*, would be carried out to the provinces by messengers and heralds. The messengers of Caesar carried the gospel of Caesar throughout the empire.

Paul, of course, speaks of the gospel of Christ. This proclamation is the good news from God (not Caesar) that salvation has come, that Jesus (not Caesar) is Lord. It is a proclamation brought to shepherds on a hillside by God’s herald angels (*ángelos* is the Greek word for a “messenger” from the gods).

Christians are those who believe that Jesus is Lord *already*. If you read these studies regularly you know that I often write about the Christian claim that the kingdom of God has come *already*, but *not yet*.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is Lord of all creation and all persons now. Jesus’ Lordship is not something we are waiting for.

There are people who have not heard of Jesus and countless more who refuse to acknowledge Jesus at all. But their refusal doesn’t diminish our claim that the “gospel of Christ” is true. It is a bit like an American who says, “George W. Bush is not my President.” The truth is that Bush is the president, whether everyone acknowledges it or not, whether they like it or not.

God’s proclamation, this *evangelion* of Christ, is public. It is for the whole world. Even for those who refuse to hear, whose hearts blind them to the truth. Paul’s point in 1:27 is that we are to live lives that are worthy of this proclamation. It is a public proclamation that we are to live out in public lives. How else could we ever be the light to the world? (See Matthew 5:14-16)

1. If you are new to this *already/not yet* perspective, the June 29, 2003, Sermon Background Study is a good place to start. All the studies are downloadable pdf files posted at [www.standrewacademy.org](http://www.standrewacademy.org).

<sup>1</sup>Professor Hooker’s outstanding commentary on Philippians is part of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, a twelve volume commentary set on the entire Bible. The complete set is in the St. Andrew library.

*The life I've always wanted?*

But what is the shape of a life worthy of the gospel of Christ? We've been using John Ortberg's book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, to learn about practices that can help us "gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it." But what does that sort of life really look like? Is it really the life I've always wanted? Do I really want to live as Jesus taught and modeled? Perhaps my desires need some work too.

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul devotes himself to laying out the shape of this life. Early in the letter, Paul emphasizes unity among the Christians, a recurring theme across his letters, giving believers some general instruction:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.<sup>2</sup>

Does Paul describe here the life I've always wanted? I don't know that I've always wanted it, but as I've gotten older, wiser, and closer to God, such a life is the life I want now. A life filled with loving, deep-spirited friends and helping hands? Of course I want such a life. And to find it, I must look upward.

*Looking up*

In today's Scripture passage from Colossians, Paul reminds us that because we have been raised with Christ,<sup>3</sup> we are to look upward. We are to focus our minds and energies on the things of God, not allowing ourselves to be dragged down by the priorities and demands that the world seeks to thrust upon us.

Consider this. What commands the bulk of your attention? Does it lift you up? Does it strengthen you? Challenge you? Humble you? Make you more Christlike? Are your eyes truly cast upward? Here is more of Paul's advice to the Philippians:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9, NRSV)

In his commentary on Philippians, Gerald Hawthorne writes, "Paul's wish is that the Philippians might enjoy productive, worry-free lives with their thoughts and feelings guarded by the peace of God. He told them that they might attain this goal with the aid of prayer and thanksgiving. But that is not all that is required. In v. 8 and 9 he adds still other important steps. He says that fear, worry, anxiety, depression—all the countless concerns that bombard the Philippian Christians' minds—can be kept at bay, if they will continuously reckon up, think over, estimate aright, fill their minds with all things good and true, and then rise up and put into practice the demands of the Christian gospel. 'Then indeed,' Paul says, 'the God of peace will be with you.'"<sup>4</sup> . . . Yes, this is the life I've always wanted.

#### Excellence

Have you ever wondered what God thinks of baseball? Personally, I think God enjoys a well-turned double-play! Here is what I mean.

In Philippians 4:8, Paul urges the Philippians to dwell upon the things of "excellence." He uses a Greek noun that he never uses in the rest of his letters, *arete*. In the NT world, the meaning of *arete* was very broad, encompassing all virtues, all excellence, and all goodness. It was a word that certainly conveyed moral excellence, but also more. Paul uses it in that larger sense.

God is good – indeed, God defines it in his very being. All the goodness and all the excellence and all the virtues in God's creation point us toward God; it is all to God's glory. In the goodness of this world we can glimpse the kingdom of God. This is why Christians seek excellence in all we do – a well-done project at the office, a well-delivered lesson in the elementary classroom, a well-prepared meal – all this glorifies God. Will we actually *be* excellent in all we do? At least speaking for myself – of course not! But there is great joy in seeking after excellence and this is the path to which Paul points us.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Philippians 2:14 in *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language*.

<sup>3</sup>Paul speaks of Christians both having died with Christ and having been resurrected with Christ. This is yet another way for Paul to convey the truth that the kingdom of God (and all that it means) has happened *already*, but *not yet*. When we look at all the suffering and trouble in the world it is easy for us to grasp the "not yet" aspect. But we should not let that diminish the truth that God's victory over sin and death was won on a cross two millennia ago. We are in Christ and we are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

<sup>4</sup>Hawthorne, G. F. (1998). Vol. 43: *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*

# Reading With Heart & Mind

February 4 ~ 10

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Sunday</b> <b>Philippians 2:19-30</b> Paul turns to practical matters. You'll meet Timothy, one of Paul's closest associates and the recipient of two of Paul's NT letters.</p>	<p><b>Monday</b> <b>Philippians 3:1-11</b> What is the true basis for confidence? What do you think are some of the biggest dangers that test your faith? What is the rubbish that Paul speaks about?</p>
<p><b>Tuesday</b> <b>Philippians 3:12 - 4:1</b> Press on to the goal! What is the place of imitation and role models in the practice of the Christian faith?</p>	<p><b>Wednesday</b> <b>Philippians 4:2-9</b> Read slowly through Paul's urgings to rejoice, embrace gentleness, and give up our worries. Look upward and keep doing.</p>
<p><b>Thursday</b> <b>Philippians 4:10-23</b> In his closing words, Paul contrasts living in plenty and in want. How do you think we'd do without our own plenty?</p>	<p><b>Friday</b> <b>Exodus 1-2</b> This is a longer reading, but ask yourself, "Where is God in this?" When does God hearing the cries of the slaves? What effect does the groaning have on God? What is conveyed by God's absence through most of these two chapters?</p>
<p><b>Saturday</b> <b>Exodus 3</b> Moses meets God at the burning bush. He is given a mission, despite his objections. He is also given God's name. The revealing of God's name is a big moment.</p>	

