

Joyful Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Well, again, let me welcome you. Those of you who are coming back, good to see you again. Those of you who are here for the first time, welcome to you. My name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here at Church of the Advent. And tonight we are going to continue a series. We had to take a break last week. I got deathly ill. It's one of the only times I've had to miss church. Whatever I got, I hope and pray you don't get it. But my family then got sick, so that's why they're not here tonight. So they told me to tell you hello. But Laura's currently laid up on the couch. But for whatever reason, when I was laying on my back for those few days, I found myself reading health blogs. And, you know, just kind of wondering if there are things that I could do to be healthier and to not get sick like that ever again. And I came across this blog that said, here are ten visible signs that you are healthy. So the idea is that you can look at somebody or look at yourself in the mirror and not really know anything about them, but use these signs. And you can tell just by looking whether or not they're healthy. And it's interesting because that pertains a bit to what we're going to be talking about tonight at the end of chapter 1 in the book of Philippians, the last few verses of chapter 1, beginning in verse 27.

Paul, if you may remember, if you're familiar, you've been coming the past few weeks, Paul is writing this letter and he's in prison, and he's facing the very realistic possibility of his own execution. And he loves these Philippians, and he's wanting more than anything to see them grow in their faith. And so this section that we come to, we see that Paul lists some characteristics of what a healthy, flourishing faith looks like. So just like there are visible signs of physical health, Paul's saying there are visible signs of spiritual health. He says, so in the event that I die and that I don't see you again, this is the kind of faith I hope you have. And he even says, only let. That's the beginning of the passage that we're looking at, the word only. It's his way of saying, if nothing else, at least I hope this is true. And so these characteristics of a healthy, vibrant, flourishing, joy-filled faith versus a stagnating faith, a faith that is life-giving versus a faith that is soul-sucking and dead. Here are the characteristics. One, it's a public faith. Two, it's a communal faith. And three, it's a costly faith. So these are the three things, public, communal, and costly. And some of us are here and we're Christians, and you may think of this as a kind of diagnostic tool as you think about your own spiritual life. Some of you are here and you're not Christians, maybe not sure what you believe. I would encourage you to think about perhaps the Christians in your life and to think, if these characteristics defined their faith, would you consider the things they believe in a different light? How would this make you think differently about the claims that the Christian faith makes? Let's pray for the Lord to lead us as we open to Paul's letter. Lord, we do know that on our own, we're just looking at ink and paper. These are just words on a page. And at best, we may have some human wisdom, some jokes, some niceties. But Lord, our real hope tonight is not to hear from people, from human beings, but actually to hear from you. And I desperately need to hear from you. We all do. So we pray that even as you're present here with us, so you would speak, that these written words would reveal to us the living word of your Son, Jesus Christ. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen. So the first thing that we see Paul lists, characteristic of a growing, flourishing, vibrant faith, is this. It's a public faith. It's a public faith. He says, only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. Now, I want to say right off the bat, what this sounds like is saying is, I hope that you're living lives that are worthy of the gospel, as in I hope you're good enough. But most of us know the gospel by its very nature is the claim that God gives people things that we're not worthy of. So we know that that couldn't be what this means. And in fact, it's not. The phrase manner of life is actually a political, in the Greek, it's a political reference. It comes from a word, the root of which is polis, from which we get politics. And this word really means exercising your citizenship.

So it helps to understand that Philippi was a Roman colony, and they were very proud of this. They were very proud of the fact that they were a Roman colony, that if you were a Philippian, it meant that your name was listed in the membership roster in Rome. And you spoke the language, you spoke Latin, and you dressed like a Roman, and you ate Roman food and observed Roman customs and worshipped Roman gods, and you had all the privileges and the responsibilities of a Roman citizen. Which meant, in effect, that Philippi was like a little Rome. It was a miniature Rome. [5 : 46] And so Paul is saying, as proud as you are and as aware as you are of your Roman citizenship, even deeper than that, you are citizens of the kingdom of God. You're a citizen in God's kingdom.

And so he's saying, you, Philippians, or those of us here who are followers of Jesus, as we're gathered in this church that we rent on a rainy Sunday evening, he says it may not look like it to you, it may not feel like it to you, but this is a miniature version of the kingdom of God. Those of you who belong to Jesus, your name is written in the citizenship roster. You have all of the rights and the privileges and the responsibilities of a citizen of the kingdom. Live lives, then, that reflect that faithfully. That's what he's saying. So the role of an ambassador is what? Those of you who work in government, the role of an ambassador is to live in a foreign country, country, but to represent their own country as well as they possibly can. And they do that largely by garnering goodwill and developing good relationships with leaders in the country in which they live. But they do that faithfully representing the interests of their country in places where they are not citizens. And that's what Paul is saying we're called to do. Live lives that reflect your true citizenship. Miroslav Volf is a professor at Yale. Some of you may be familiar with his work. He wrote a book recently called A Public Faith. And he's written a lot of great things, but public faith is really good. If you're looking for a good summer read, it might be worth picking up. But he talks about the two primary malfunctions that occur when faith and culture meet. He says, one, the one way that faith goes wrong when it tries to engage culture is coerciveness, and the other is idleness. So coerciveness, coerciveness is when people try to force their religion to be the only religion in society, the dominant religion, forcing, we want all buildings to have the Ten Commandments, that kind of thing. When any religion says, this is going to be the only religion in society, that's coerciveness. Volf says there's a whole host of problems. Christians, chiefly, among all people, should be concerned with any form of coerciveness because that's not a reflection of the kingdom of

God. But he says on the other hand, and I don't think I have to make that case here. I think we probably mostly agree on that. But he says the same risk exists on the other end of the spectrum with idleness. And by idleness, he means a faith that is so privatized, that is so hidden, that is so personalized, that it really has very little bearing on your life. And nobody who doesn't know you really well is going to have any idea that you even subscribe to such a faith. And I think that's much more our tendency. If you're anything like me, the tendency is to compartmentalize your faith. I have my job. I have my friends from college. I have my friends from grad school. I have my work friends. And they're all kind of separate. And I have my friends from church, and I have my kind of church life. And other than those kind of unintended overlaps where you're out with friends from one group and friends from another group kind of show up at the bar, and you have that moment of which me am I going to be in this moment? Other than that, we hope that they kind of don't really intersect too much. And most of us, I think, are really good at just sort of swimming between multiple versions of yourself. And sometimes we're not even really sure who we really are.

[9 : 40] And what this would say is, is that growing in our faith means moving away from compartmentalization and toward integration, where your faith begins to permeate and inform all of the spheres of your life. Another way of putting it is this. Wolf is sort of saying this, that we're not called to be culture warriors. We're not called to fight the culture war. By the way, Christians lost a long time ago. We're not called to fight the culture war, nor are we called to be wallflowers. We are called to be witnesses. And there's a big difference between being a warrior, being a wallflower, and being a witness, someone whose very life points to the truth of the gospel. So for instance, think about your job. I mean, for most of us, other than, you know, our job, if you could pick one thing where you spend most of your time and energy, even those of us who are married and have families, probably our jobs get the best of us, if we're honest. Our jobs, whether we know it or not, your ordinary day-to-day is a form of public faith. That's not just something that's true of people who work for the church.

Your job is a form, it's an expression of faith. People make inferences about what we believe based on how they see us conduct ourselves, how they see us operate. So the little opportunities that you have on a daily basis, just to interact with people, to build community, or to shun community, to meet needs, to serve others, to show little kindnesses, the choice you make either to hold a grudge and get revenge or to forgive, the choices you make to throw people under the bus to advance yourself, or to maybe even take a hit, to avoid doing something that conflicts with your morals. These are sometimes hard choices, sometimes very easy choices, but in all these small, tiny, seemingly insignificant ways, we are actually manifesting a public faith. We're demonstrating through all these little things what really matters to us, what we really believe about the world. Abraham Kuyper, one of my favorite thinkers on this topic, says this, and forgive the gendered language he was writing a little while ago, wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, or the world of art and science, he is, and whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God.

He's employed in the service of his God. He has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God. So, he's saying this, just by the sheer fact that you are at work, that God has placed you there, that you doing your job and doing it well, that that in itself is a way to glorify God, because God designed you, he wired you to work in politics, or in business, or in agriculture, or in whatever you do. He wired you, and when you do what he made you to do, it brings him glory. You know, that's why Dorothy Sayers famously said, the only Christian job is a job well done. There is no Christian job versus secular job. Christians, whatever job they have, glorify God simply by being excellent at what they do. That's something we don't often reflect on. So, for most of us, our job is one of the central ministries that God has given us. It's great to volunteer. It's great to mentor. It's great to serve at soup kitchens. It's great to do all that stuff. Do that. But don't forget that your primary ministry is probably your job. That's where you're going to have potentially the most impact on the people around you. Every day our lives are making implicit statements about our beliefs. So, the question is this, do you have a public faith? Are you aware of that? A way of thinking about it is this, having a public faith in the way Paul means, means living our lives in ways that provoke questions only the gospel can answer. Right? So, the gospel is best presented in the form of an answer to a question. People look at it, and they look at what you're doing, and they look at the choices that you're making, and it doesn't make sense, and they say, how can you explain this? Why would you do that? You know, I knew one guy who was working toward partnership in a law firm, and he realized that he was never seeing his family. He was never seeing his wife. He was never seeing his kids.

[14 : 29] He had abandoned them. He was working, you know, 90 hours, 100 hours a week, sleeping at his office, and he finally realized that this isn't what God had called him to do, and he realized that if he went to half time, he could still make enough money to cover all of their needs financially, and so he, they made a decision for him to get off the partner track and to cut his hours back so that he could be with us, and everybody said, you're insane. See, that provokes questions, and the answer to those questions has to do with a God, a pearl of great price, a way of life that we believe is more good, and more beautiful, and more true. So do we have a public faith? Does your life provoke those kinds of questions? When people look at the way you spend your money, your time, the way you deal with people who disagree with you, the way you handle criticism, right? Do you, do you defend and justify your actions, you know, teach people to never criticize you, or do you recognize that we're all sinners in need of forgiveness by God, and you probably did screw up, and you should at least be willing to consider the truth.

Is our faith publicly visible? That's the first thing that Paul says. Now, the next point makes sense if you understand that, because if you actually think about what this looks like, you realize it's hard. It's really hard, and so Paul says you can't do it alone, you need other people, and that's why the second aspect is this, it has to be a communal faith.

You need, you need other people to share this burden with. He says in verse 27, whether I come and see you, or I'm absent, meaning dead, I hope that I may hear that you're standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. It's a beautiful passage, and this is a vision, this is a vision of Christians who are together, they're united, they're of one mind and one spirit, and they're actively engaged. There's no wallflowers, there's no onlookers, there's no kind of just passive recipients. Everybody is engaged for the sake of the gospel, and there's an

emphasis here on unity, right, on being of one mind. Now, at Church of the Advent, we, when it comes to people being involved in our church and becoming members of our church, we talk about the difference between the essentials of the Christian faith and the distinctives of the Christian faith, right? So we focus on, we try to focus on the essentials of the Christian faith, the gospel. What does it mean to have a relationship with God, and what does it mean to live in light of that relationship faithfully? That's the gospel. And then we have all kinds of distinctives. I'm wearing a white robe. Why? Because we're Anglicans. That's a distinctive, but we don't really emphasize that. We have beliefs and stances on things that other faithful Christians would disagree on, right? And there are lots of issues throughout history of the church that Christians, faithful followers of Jesus, have disagreed on. Church polity, how do you govern a church? What should worship look like? Should we baptize only believing adults or also babies? These are things that faithful Christians have and will disagree on. Scripture is not totally clear on these issues. Those would be called distinctives. And so we separate between essentials and distinctives, the hope being that if we can have unity in the essentials, then we can pursue like-mindedness with charity and love and respect in the distinctives.

[18:07] Right? But one of the things, just to be clear, here's the thing. When we say that an issue is a distinctive, it's not the same as saying it doesn't matter or it's not important, and it's not the same as saying that multiple viewpoints are true, because we believe at the end of the day there is a right answer to these questions. It may not be totally clear now, but we believe that our job as Christians is to pursue greater and greater clarity on these issues. We should always be striving to be of one mind, as Paul says. And you know, I think Christians, we don't realize, those of us who are Christians, that we should be the best in the world at knowing how to disagree with people or be disagreed with and still love and respect and have civility. Right? Because at the very heart of our faith is a God who gives his life for people who hate him and disagree with him. So if there's any, any integration of our faith and our life, we should be really good at interacting with people who disagree with us and saying, it's okay, I still love you, I still respect you. I may be wrong. Right? There should be that kind of open-handed humility. Right? You know, personally, I know that over the years we've had people here and there, Christians, who leave our church. We've had people leave our church because they disagree over this or that issue. And they say, well, I want to go find a church that aligns with what I believe on this or that issue. And you know, that's going to happen. I mean, in any church that happens. Right? That's just a part of church life. But the thing that breaks my heart is when that happens and those people at no point were willing to engage or discuss or debate these issues, either with me or other people who might disagree with them. That's what breaks my heart. Now, it may still lead to the same outcome. People may still leave. That's fine. But I feel like when we avoid the hard conversations, when we avoid the opportunity to sit down, open Scripture, and figure out what it says,

I feel like we're missing something vital. It's our loss when that doesn't happen. And you know, honestly, if I, maybe this is just me, but I think that a lot of us are terrified, terrified, at the prospect of somebody disagreeing with us. You know, the idea of somebody looking at you and saying, I think you're wrong. I think you're full of crap. I don't think you know what you're talking about. I think that's terrifying to us. It's as though we will, at that very moment, melt into a puddle. Listen, the time comes when you have to own and take responsibility for what you believe or what you don't believe. You believe in Jesus great. You don't believe in Jesus great. You think that there is truth to the gospel? Great. You think that it's all fiction, myth? Great. But own your beliefs. Be willing to admit your beliefs. And be willing to put yourself in a situation where somebody looks at you and says, I think that you're full of it. Because you know what? If you're anything like me, I think from time to time having somebody stick their finger in your face and tell you that they think that you're wrong, I think that's one of the best things that could happen to us.

Because that is the only thing that's going to drive you back to scripture, drive you to your knees in prayer, drive you into the arms of Jesus, and drive you to that place where you're going to decide, what do I really believe? And do I believe it enough to stake my life and my reputation on it? How else are you going to grow in your faith unless you put yourself out there? If you don't know what you believe, how are you going to figure out what you believe if you don't put yourself out there? Christians should be more than willing to take those hits. That's exactly what we saw our God do. So Paul calls us to have a public faith, living out our faith in the open, being honest. Not as culture warriors and not as wallflowers, but as witnesses. He also calls us to a communal faith,

doing faith together, working out our differences, pursuing unity in the essentials, relying on the grace and the truth and the love of the gospel to unite us, even when we have differences. And then the last aspect of a healthy, thriving, growing, joy-filled faith is this, it will involve suffering. It is a costly faith. It says in verse 29, 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. Disclaimer, I don't think this is just talking about any kind of suffering. This is not a kind of, you know, some sort of sadistic spirituality, you know. The more you suffer, the more it makes God happy, that's not what he's saying. This isn't talking about illness and oppression and chronic pain and this is not talking about just sort of that suffering exists because the world is a broken, evil place and our bodies are broken. This is talking about the specific kind of suffering that comes from following Jesus in this world. The same suffering that Jesus experienced, the same suffering that Paul experienced and the same suffering that he says all followers of Jesus will experience. The sacrifices that it requires, but also the people who will disagree and who will make your life really, really, really hard because of what you believe.

Again, in our culture, I think the idea of anything that causes suffering, the idea of suffering implies that something has gone wrong. You know, I said in the morning service that we, you know, I told you my whole family got sick and my wife sent me to CVS down the road to get some medicine that would hopefully make her feel better and I love a good mission and so I went and I'm going to get the medicine and I get there right at 10 o'clock p.m. and the doors are locked.

[24 : 27] And I was raging, how could this happen? You know, such a cosmic injustice, 10 o'clock and they won't let me in. And I had this moment of realizing I just live off the assumption that if I need any medicine for anything, that I should be able to walk three blocks from my house and get that medicine at any hour of the day or night. I'm privileged. We're all privileged. The idea that we should have to suffer, something is wrong, somebody needs to pay, there's been a system breakdown.

It's no surprise that we virtually invented a religion in the United States that not only promises that we don't have to suffer, but it promises that we don't even have to be inconvenienced for the sake of our faith. It's kind of a hijacked version of Judeo-Christian spirituality. It's what the sociologist Christian Smith calls moralistic therapeutic deism.

Moralistic therapeutic deism. What does it say? Well, it's pretty basic. There is a God. God basically just wants us to be nice to each other. Good people go to heaven. And God's job is really to make sure that you're happy, that you're fulfilled, and that you feel good about yourself.

That's moralistic therapeutic deism. And here's the reason I'm bringing it up. Many people in our country who believe that they are Christians, who go to Christian churches, who are baptized as Christians, who check the Christian box on the census surveys, they're actually subscribing to moralistic therapeutic deism, and they don't know it.

Here are five principles from the Bible to help you be more successful in your job. God wants you to live your best life now. Here's four ways from Scripture that you can improve your relationships.

That is moralistic therapeutic deism. It has very little to do with the gospel.

[26 : 32] Very little to do with Jesus. But it's very attractive. Four principles from the Bible to help you unleash your full potential, nobody's going to argue with that.

That doesn't ask anything of you. You can be a complete atheist, and you're like, hey, I'll just put that on my advice list. That sounds great. I'll try that out. Principles for living, that's fantastic.

It's as convenient as it is anemic. The gospel, and I'm talking about the real gospel, is so much better and so much more beautiful, but it begins with bad news.

It's as, hey, bad news. You know, before the good news has to come the bad news. The bad news is this. You have a disorder.

It's kind of a love disorder, right? You have a disordered love. In other words, the things that you love tend to take over and enslave you.

[27 : 34] Right? So if you're anything like me, you love your own glory. I love, I don't love God's glory. I love my glory. I want to be the guy up front. I want to be the guy.

I want to be the important person. I want to be the person that people respect. I love my glory. And, you know, those of us who have jobs that promise glory, we will work 100 hours a week for that glory.

You know, we talk about, we talk about, we can't believe that ancient Babylonian pagans used to sacrifice their children on the altar to Moloch or whoever. Child sacrifice is alive and well.

But we just sacrifice our kids on the altar of work and glory and success, right? So we have a disorder of love.

The things that we love take over our lives. They enslave us. And the places we look to for love never deliver. You can marry the best person in the world and all the, your Myers-Briggs scores are perfectly compatible.

[28 : 34] And it's amazing. And you're the same level of attractiveness. And the same, and all the inventories say two thumbs up. And, and all the, you know, the sexual chemistry is through the roof, you know, at least for the first six months.

And their love is not going to be enough. It's not going to be enough. At some point you're going to say my needs aren't getting met here. It's because you're not meant to get that need met from anything here.

The only thing that's going to meet that need is the love and the presence of God. But that's the nature of the disorder. It's like an eating disorder or an addiction. We're not seeing things clearly.

And so the Bible says, and here's the beautiful part, you have a disorder of love.

That's your issue. But the answer is love. But it's God's love. It's God saying I'm going to give everything necessary so that you can belong to me. And you can relearn how to be loved.

And out of that relearn how to love your family and your friends and your coworkers and your neighbors. Right? From being loved well, you're going to relearn how to love well.

[29 : 40] So here's the church. We're all dressed and we look nice and you guys look great. And we're in this kind of very formal space. And I'm 30 feet in the air on this kind of raised platform. And it feels very formal.

But don't be fooled. This is like a giant rehab meeting. It's like an AA meeting and it should be in the basement. Right? And we're all sitting in the chairs. And I take this off and I'm just sitting in my chair.

And we're all sitting in the metal chairs. And one by one we could stand up and talk about how this disorder has created destruction in our lives. And how we want to be free of it.

And you know in AA there is suffering because people are willing to sacrifice whatever it takes.

Because they believe that being free from that addiction is worth whatever price.

And for those of us who have really become convinced that the gospel is true, we feel the same way. I am, I, it will, whatever it takes, whatever I have to sacrifice, however I have to suffer, I will do it. Because I believe that one day I will be free from the need to love things that destroy me.

[30 : 42] And I will be freed from the need to seek love from things that will destroy me. And one day I will be able to love the one being who will give me life and set me free.

And then I will be able to love others in a way that will give them life and set them free. And it's worth whatever it takes. The Bible says the more we grow in that way, the more we are actually becoming human.

That's the promise of the gospel. So do you want to know whether or not you have a healthy, vibrant, growing, joy-filled faith?

Here's three things that you can consider as we move ahead in our gathering tonight. First, is it a public faith? Is there any aspect of your faith that is visible?

Is it integrated, in other words, enough into your life that other people might be able to catch glimmers of it as you go about your daily rhythms? That's the first thing. The second thing, is it communal?

[31 : 49] Are there other people with whom you share your faith? Are you at the point where you're willing to disagree and be disagreed with? Are you interested in pursuing greater clarity and understanding on the issues that you don't understand or where you do disagree with your friends or your community?

And then thirdly, does it cost you anything? That may be the single most important diagnostic indicator. Does your faith cost you anything? Why does that matter?

Why does that matter? Because your faith cost Jesus everything. And it was his delight to pay it. So we should at least consider whether or not we understand what it is into which we have entered.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for what is true of this. What is not true, I pray that we would remember it no more.

What is true, Lord, what is of you, we pray that you would, by the power of your spirit, implant your word deep in our heart. That it would bring life into us and through us.

[32 : 58] That we would know more of what it means that we are loved by you. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.