

Phillippians 2021 - Part 2

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[0 : 00] It's been a while since we've been called in this way and we are to recognize a few things. But before we get there, we have to recognize a few other things.

And that is what we read in Philippians chapter 1 verses 12 through to 18. The reason I speak about recognition is because it is linked very much to consideration.

Your Christian life really reflects the considerations that go through your heart and your mind on a daily basis in light of the word.

In other words, that if you don't consider aspects of the Christian faith, then those aspects are sort of, they're just overlooked. And it is entirely possible for the Christian life to go into an autopilot at the limit which you think you have reached.

Now, of course, God is never finished with us and we should never think in terms of limits, but in terms of change and becoming like Christ. So here is something for us to consider this morning.

[1 : 12] And therefore, it's not just something to listen to. It's something to consider, to take to heart, to question how it will affect us tomorrow, what changes we might make in the light of what we read, what we will do after we have heard these words explained and applied.

These are considerations. We are to consider the word. I am, my aim, my only aim is to say what God says.

My job is, the point of the message is to be the point of the passage. And I really have, it's difficult to do, but I really have no other aim. I have to be persuasive. But as I've often said, you don't need me to tell you how valuable you are.

If you do, then there's a problem. Because Christ is constantly telling you who you are before him. And if that doesn't motivate you, I'm not even going to get close to what he can demonstrate and show you and tell you in his will.

I'm not even going to get close to it. You know, we are to be imitators of Christ. And I am a poor imitator in many ways. Every way, perhaps.

[2 : 27] Well, let's read these words. Philippians chapter 1, verses 12 through to 18. Now hear God's word. I want you to know, brothers, what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

So that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

As most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.

The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

What then? I just want to make one comment because I'm not really going to touch on this.

- [3 : 43] We could probably spend a lifetime. And that is, I've always found this passage to be remarkable that Paul even considers the proclamation of Christ through impure motives. This is good. In other words, it's that classic example of, I mean, how many of you were brought up in churches telling you that you have to be a clean and perfect vessel for God to use you?
- And then you read like the book of Esther and think, hang on a minute. She's hardly clean or perfect or close. And look at how God used her. Now, God put her between a rock and a hard place.
- Fair enough. God will be done on earth as it is in heaven. But here, it's always struck me that Paul doesn't actually go out to, let's address these impure motives.
- They need addressing. But what trumps it is the fact Christ is still proclaimed. You know, who would actually go out to proclaim Christ at a impure motives?
- [4 : 47] I think anyone who likes to build a ministry and build it around, perhaps give it a nice title and advertise on Google and a number of other things.
- You know, I think this is in there somewhere. I'm not against advancing the gospel, of course. Well, let's understand what this has to say.
- I'm going to pray. Father God, help us now with a clean heart and a clean mind that you would renew our mind with a view of changing our heart through the words that you have for us here in Jesus' name.
- Amen. Well, it should be fairly clear to you that serving the interests of God rather than your own interests is what this section is about. Serving the interests of God rather than your own interests.
- And I said at the very beginning of the letter, Paul has already sowed the seed of what it is to be a servant of the Lord. And he does this by making sure he doesn't include his apostleship.
- [5 : 52] When he writes to the Galatians or Corinthians, he includes it. Here he doesn't because he wants to drive home not necessarily the authority he has been given by God, but rather what that authority calls him to be, namely a servant.
- Well, now he moves on to address that we servants are to serve the interests of God rather than our own interests.
- We are to serve the interests of God rather than our own. Now, he's setting up his stall because when he gets to chapter 2 and he speaks about the kenosis, that is where Christ emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant and then serving us.
- Christ emptied himself. And this then becomes both an example and a model to follow that Paul is going to get to, but he's just showing you in his own life first that your requirement before God is to empty yourself of self.
- You are required as someone who belongs to God to empty yourself of self. And that's the focus here.
- [7 : 13] Emptying yourself of self. Or at least that's what Paul is moving towards bit by bit. This is the first stage in which he demonstrates that the way we get there is by making sure that the interests of God are our interests.
- And whatever our interests are, that is normally the place where our investments will be. So whatever interests you will get your investment, whether it be an investment of time, of money, just you, just giving yourself and whatever comes with you.
- Well, here's the summary. So the question is, what interests you and why does it interest you? And whatever interests you the most will direct your next step, your next investment, whatever you do.

Paul is in prison and he wants us to understand that the circumstance is an opportunity for the advance of the gospel. It's not a terrible thing. It's more like house arrest, ready for the trial.

But nonetheless, the conditions that he is within are no doubt grim. And yet he says, verse 12, that this is an opportunity for me to advance the gospel.

[8 : 27] In other words, he wants you to understand his imprisonment as an opportunity for gospel advancing. The question is, is why does Paul interpret it that way? Why does Paul interpret that circumstance as an opportunity?

How do you actually come to do something like that? So the question is, is why has Paul been arrested? Now, we know that normally you get arrested for breaking the law and you go to prison when you break the law.

We also know that in the eyes of the Roman authorities, Paul is a follower of a criminal. All Christians follow a criminal in the eyes of the Roman authorities because Christ was crucified under Roman law.

And so according to the Romans, he is a man who was tried under Pilate, crucified, and in the eyes of Roman understanding, he's a criminal. He was tried, convicted, and was crucified under Roman law.

Now, of course, when we actually hear the gospel account for ourselves, Pilate actually said, I find no wrong in him. He said it on multiple accounts. I find nothing wrong with him.

[9 : 38] And if you find nothing wrong with him, let him go. But the people cried out, crucify him. And now we understand that it was this, that by sinful hands, Jesus was led to the cross.

But it was God's plan to put him to the cross. And so this is why Paul is in prison. Not because of anything that he has said or done, but rather because of who he is.

Christianity and chains seem to go hand in hand. That Paul is in prison for being a Christian. Paul is in prison because of who he is. Because there can't really be any definitive charge against him.

He hasn't really done anything wrong. He has done nothing wrong. Now, with this in mind, we are to consider, Paul says, the positive results of Paul's imprisonment on the lives of other people.

And the positive results, verse 14, is that brothers, most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear.

[10 : 48] In other words, the effect that this has had on fellow Christians is that I see Paul in prison. And Paul is quite happy to consider that an opportunity to advance the gospel.

And now, suddenly, I'm encouraged by that to think, what have I got to fear? Because wherever I end up, it is an opportunity to advance the gospel. As long as my heart is filled with the interests of God.

I would see prison entirely differently if I had other interests and other concerns. And so we get back to this idea of interests.

Paul is in prison for the defense of the gospel, verse 15 and 16. And those who preach Christ out of selfish ambition, what we have is a contrasting motivation.

But what Paul says, ultimately, is yes, you can see the contrast in motivations in whose interests are being served. Some are serving the advance of the gospel to serve their own interests.

[11 : 54] And some are serving the advance of the gospel because they are motivated by God's interests. Either way, Paul says, Christ is being proclaimed.

And perhaps when we look at some of the ministries that exist throughout the world that have a multi-million pound turnover, and you think, well, what is the motivation behind that?

I heard one church not so long ago in an email sent to me saying that they needed to keep their turnover to 1.2 million a year just to keep the church open.

Why don't you sell your building? So circumstances as an opportunity.

This is the thing that Paul wants you to consider. How do circumstances become an opportunity for you to advance the gospel? And why does Paul consider his circumstances an opportunity rather than a barrier, rather than something that is actually stopping him from doing what he wants to do?

[13 : 06] Well, because what he wants to do is serve the interests of God. And according to Paul, he can do that wherever he is. So it's impossible for the imprisonment to be seen as a barrier or a block to serving the interests of God.

It's rather an opportunity to get into a place where you wouldn't be able to get to normally to then advance the gospel. And how does he do this? By telling them about Christ.

He's not seeking to serve his own interests, but rather the interests of God. And so this is the connection. This is how they are linked. You will consider your circumstances an opportunity for God depending on whether or not your interests are God interests.

If not, then your circumstances can be a barrier, a frustration to what you want to do to your future.

So if you're living with a set of circumstances that are frustrating and a barrier, and you're not able to fulfill the future that you thought you would have, what that is showing you is that your interests are more about you than they are about God.

[14 : 25] And so when you end up in a situation that you'd rather not be in, Paul is kind of saying here, you really ought to consider that as an opportunity for you to be Christian, for you to be a witness, for you to proclaim Christ.

Instead, the reason you consider it as a block and a frustration and a barrier is because it is probably stopping you from doing what you want to do.

And therefore, when you put these together, you are recognizing that your interests are not actually the interests of God. They may be good interests.

They may be good things. And this is what Paul is effectively saying when he considers his imprisonment as an opportunity to advance the gospel. The only reason you would consider it an opportunity to be in prison is if your interest is to do what God wants.

If it's to retire and go and buy a villa in Spain where you can live six months of the year. Selfish ambition. That's not serving the interests of God.

[15 : 35] And if you're in prison and you can't do that, then suddenly you can see, you can see how that frustration kicks in because what's being robbed is what you want to do.

Paul feels no robbery. In fact, he feels that this opportunity is quite freeing in the sense that he can advance the gospel in an area where previously it had not been advanced.

So the reason why Paul considers his circumstances an opportunity for advancing the gospel is because what interests him are the interests of God.

Period. What interests him are the interests of God. Now, how do you get to that place? Well, Paul's going to show us in chapter 2 you have to do something very difficult and that is you have to empty yourself of self.

Jesus says in Mark 8, take up your cross and deny yourself. It's exactly the same thing. And unless you empty yourself of self, there will always be residue self-interest there.

[16 : 51] And that residue self-interest is enough and is powerful enough to actually get you to do what you want to do rather than serve the interests of God.

And this is contrasted here between Paul's ambition to advance the gospel contrasted against the selfish ambition to preach the gospel out of rivalry and envy.

You know, they're doing it to sort of bring some kind of harm to Paul. They're doing it to say, look, we're not in prison. Look what we can, right? We've got the freedom. Look at what we're doing. Paul's saying you've got it entirely the wrong way around.

So unless you empty yourself of self, it is very unlikely that what interests God is going to interest you because what interests you is going to get in the way.

And this is what Paul is getting to. Jeremiah says this, seek great things for thyself, seek them not. Seek great things for thyself, seek them not.

[17 : 59] Be ambitious. Be really, really ambitious. But just don't do it for yourself. Do it for the things of God. Be incredibly ambitious. And take the biggest risk.

In fact, I had a conversation with someone only a couple of weeks ago on risk. And I said, I don't see the problem with risk in the sense that if God has given you everything in the first place and you haven't earned it, but it has actually come to you, then what you're risking is only what God has given to you.

Too often, we don't want to risk because we think this is what we have accrued. This is what we have earned. This is what we've got. And so risk becomes very frightening. But when you look at risk from a biblical point of view as in what interests God, then of course these things matter.

I'm also very concerned about the very modern temptation that you have of you can be anything and you can do anything. This drive to give young people ambition, they're going about it in the wrong way.

You know, the way to compensate for young people now in a world that really doesn't offer much for them, it's going to be a hard graft for young people entering into the workplace and making a future an incredibly hard graft.

[19 : 21] And the way the world does this is it gets their hope up by saying, you can be anything, you can do anything. In other words, it sells the dream because you can always sell a dream, right?

The trouble is, is the reason why this conflicts so terribly with scripture is because scripture says, let no man think more highly of himself than he ought.

Let no man think more highly of himself than he ought. In other words, God is saying, you can't be anything and you can't do anything. There is God assigned roles for you that will make you full of joy if you keep close and clean to God.

But I am never going to be a world-class golfer or a world-class footballer or a world-class, I'm probably not going to be a world-class anything.

Right? I'm not going to play basketball. I'm not tall enough. I'm not going to be a goalkeeper. Don't have quick enough reflexes. Okay? I have God-ordained limitations that I am to live within and I can take, I can be ambitious for God because greater is he who is in me than he who is in the world.

[20 : 36] In other words, my strength and my core to go forward is what God enables me to do. The reason why they didn't like Paul is because Paul was a terrible speaker.

Paul had the worst oratory amongst all the speakers of the gospel. That's why they didn't like him because in the days that Paul spoke, speaking was a key qualification to be very unique and to be very, you know, have a nice accent or to have nice words.

And all of that, God just, none of that interests me. So the interests of God. Secondly then, now having looked at how circumstances can become opportunities, we must turn our attention to how the interests of God should not be included within a privatized faith.

And by privatized faith, I want you to recognize that since circumstances and opportunity and interests are linked together and therefore self-denial is linked, emptying yourself of self.

To put it in the words of Donald MacLeod, who I sat under for a number of years, Professor MacLeod said this, that denying self can cause the loss of friendships, the loss of your reputation, the loss of your possessions because you are no longer your own, but you are bought with a price and therefore you belong to your faithful savior who you serve.

[22 : 13] The person who seeks to protect themselves from such consequences, as Donald MacLeod puts it, what happens is that Christianity becomes private and convictions are merely internal with no outward witness.

you have a privatized faith. Your convictions are internal and that satisfies you. They would never get you put in prison because they're internal.

You would never get into trouble with them because you're able, for some reason, that you believe, to live the Christian life in your heart. quite shocking.

But true Christianity, the true self-denial can cause the loss of possessions, the loss of friendships, even within families, the loss of your reputation.

People can slander you, revile you, speak evil things against you, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. All of these things can happen to you, but the way that most Christians protect themselves from all of that is by privatizing their faith.

[23 : 26] Faith becomes a matter of the heart. Convictions become internal and therefore there is no outward witness. No outward witness. John Stolt once said that the worst thing that can be said about a Christian is that they're no different than anybody else.

That's the worst thing that could be said about you. And so by privatizing your faith in this way, that again is another form of self-interest.

You are looking after yourself and you have no business to look after yourself. It is God's duty to look after you now because you're his and he will look after you.

And so if your motivation is self-interest rather than self-denial, then you end up with a privatized faith rather than a faith that has bold witness in the world around you as followers of Christ.

Paul was in prison not because he was private, but because he was a Christian. His Christianity had an outward witness. Prison could not be avoided by him, though for many of us we could avoid it because of how we have privatized our faith.

[24 : 39] He looks at the imprisonment as a way to advance the gospel. In other words, I'm going to do the same inside the prison that I was doing outside the prison. In other words, prison will not affect me.

Prison will not change my interest or my devotion or my commitment to God. And other people look on Paul's imprisonment and go, if he can do it and if he can be that bold, then there's no reason why that cannot affect me and shape me.

So the relationship between the interests of God and our interests and self-denial is what is being addressed in these few verses here. The contrast between Paul's self-denial and the other's selfish ambition is what comes to the forefront here.

Very similar to what Jesus said about those who pray in public in order to be seen and heard by others. In other words, Jesus has addressed this issue before, that people can even pray to draw attention to themselves.

If I give you four things to pray about, but only out loud, and I say the first thing is a person's name, and I mention someone in the church, this person needs prayer.

[25 : 54] And then I mention, let's say, church growth or church discipleship or church membership, and we have an open prayer meeting, what is your temptation to pray for the person rather than the other three things?

Well, it may be very strong because of how you want to be looked upon in caring for others. This is why most prayer meetings often reflect so heavily on people who are healed in names rather than some of the other aspects that really need praying for.

Here's the exhortation as we close. We are called to empty ourself of self. That is the only way that we can serve the interests of God and consider every circumstance and opportunity for advancing the gospel.

If there is remnants of self-interest within us, they are enough to skew us away from the interests of God. Paul shows us here what it is to consider every circumstance and opportunity.

He shows us by showing us in contrast with those who have other interests and other motivations. The way you consider the circumstance you're in as an opportunity for the gospel is through self-denial and therefore filling yourself in life with the interests of God.

[27 : 15] Therefore, the bad circumstances you find yourself in will either be considered by you as a barrier to you doing what you want to do or an opportunity for doing what God has called you to do.

Every circumstance, Paul was almost saying, is an opportunity. So Paul wants you to understand this, that the way you advance the gospel is not by advancing your own interests.

The way that you advance the gospel is being ambitious for God rather than through selfish ambition. The call here is to immerse yourself in the interests of God rather than your own interest.

That doesn't mean that God doesn't give you desires or interests. What it means is the focus of your life is to serve the God to whom you belong.

So Paul does thank them for their partnership in the gospel as he does at the beginning of the letter. And he recognizes that they have become bold to speak the word without fear as a response to his imprisonment.

[28 : 23] And so ultimately all circumstances are opportunities. All circumstances are opportunities for Christ depending on what interests you.

Amen. Amen. Amen.