

“The Progress of the Gospel”

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Scripture Text: Philippians 1:12-18, ESV

The Advance of the Gospel

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

I enjoy tennis, so I was thankful this last year when my youngest son, Jackson, took an interest in the sport. He began last summer the way most people do when they pick up the game of tennis by whiffing balls and hitting them over the fence and struggling to find the service box. Jackson wanted to learn so this past year he and I would often go to the tennis court and hit balls together. I gave him my favorite racket and this past summer I spent some money for him to participate in a few tennis clinics. I made a point to talk tennis with Jackson and talk strategy and techniques to improve his abilities. I must say, Jackson has come a long, long way over the course of one year. It has been a great joy for me to see his progress.

I am not saying Jackson is a tennis star. He is not, but his game is progressing and I have really enjoyed being a part of the progress because it is one that delights my soul. I am sure you enjoy seeing progress in the causes you give time and energy and money to advance. Perhaps that cause is some talent in your children's lives. Perhaps that cause is a fight against cancer or against some other grievous disease. Perhaps that cause is a crime-free neighborhood or a well-manicured lawn. Perhaps it is a classic car restoration or a host of other legitimate hobbies or concerns.

Today, as we look at Philippians 1, the Apostle Paul calls us to set aside all other things for the advance of one cause, that all other things are to fade into the background. It is not as though they are a part of our lives, but they are not anywhere close to the important part of our lives. It is that we set our focus upon one cause that supersedes every other. Paul says this best in Verse 12,

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel...

There are all kinds of bad things that have happened to Paul. In that little statement he could have written an entire book on the bad things that happened to him, but, as we consider another version, we read,

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel...¹

To the Apostle Paul, all of life is about Jesus and the advance of His name in this world. In Verse 21, he will say, “For me to live is Christ.” For Paul, this statement was more than a bumper sticker that would look good on a Christian car. This truly was his life and it was the way he ordered everything, “For me to live is Christ.”

When I read that, God's Spirit pokes me with conviction. The principle set before us in Chapter 1 is: Jesus the Messiah is the cause that trumps every other concern we may have in this life. My concern for my hobbies, my entertainments, my sports, my physical health, my prosperity, my job, my marriage, my children, everything, falls under allegiance to Jesus Christ.

¹ New American Standard Bible (NASB)

God calls us to have a clear and sharp focus that is so determined Christ would have first place in everything. Every good gift God gives to us is given for us to enjoy and receive with thanksgiving, but it is given to us for the glory of Jesus' name, and that we would our greatest joy not in the gift itself, but from the progress of the glory of Jesus' name that God presents through that opportunity in that gift.

I must tell you, I am deeply challenged when I hear Paul's words. I know my life and my priorities need to bend to match God's. As I read this text, my soul prays. I would ask you would pray this with me, "Lord, make me a Gospel-man. Work in my soul so Jesus is first and foremost, that I would give my life fully for the advance of the Gospel. Lord, make other interests fade far and deep into the background and make the interest in Christ take center stage. Lord, set me free from the petty pursuits of security and comfort to live for a greater cause. Lord, conquer my desire for the approval of men so I might live completely for Jesus, regardless of the cost." Won't you pray that with me?

Paul provides for us an excellent example of a Gospel-saturated man. In this text we discover God is going to advance His Gospel through four specific means Paul will discuss. **The first means** comes from Verse 5, a verse we considered in our previous study and it is **God advances His Gospel through our shared partnerships,**

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Paul is expressing his love for this church and the individuals in it and the relationship they held which were forged by the Gospel and for the Gospel. The word "partnership" comes from the Greek word *koinonia* and it means what we have in common and what we share. What we share as believers is this common bond in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the glue which binds His church together. All believers, all over the world, regardless of the age in which they live, regardless of their economic conditions, regardless of their ethnicity, regardless of their gender, all of these things are boiled down to nothing compared to the interest we share together in Christ. That is what causes us to become one in Him.

God's Gospel brings a new relationship to God so we are no longer alienated from God, but we are brought into friendship with the Triune God Himself. Also, God's Gospel brings us into a new relationship with each other. Our fellowship in Christ cements us together as a family and, as the statement goes, "Blood is thicker than water," which is true, the Spirit of God is thicker than blood. The message of the New Testament is: the family relationships we have as a result of God's Spirit working within us, to forge us into this one family, is stronger than the work of God in the blood relationship we have with our physical families.

In the story in Mark 3, Jesus is back home in Capernaum. He has been accused of being irrational and out of His mind. Some of His family members believe that is true. Jesus' mother and brothers come to find Him, but because the crowds are so great they cannot get to Him. They send someone for Him and say, "Tell Jesus we are here. Tell Him we are concerned about Him." That person finally reaches Jesus and says, "Jesus, your mother and your brothers are outside. They are wanting to see you." Jesus responded, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Isn't that interesting? Looking around He says, "Here are my mother and my brothers for whomever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." What Jesus is saying is we have this fellowship with God, by God's Spirit, and it is a much stronger bond than the physical bonds we share with our physical family. No bond is stronger than the bond the Holy Spirit forges when He brings us into His family, not the bond of ethnicity, not the bond of economic status, not the bond of work experience, not the bond of social standing, not the bond of gender, not the bond of blood in family, and not even the bond of the Chicago Cubs.

All of these are obliterated in the face of the bond the Holy Spirit brings to us when we are born again. Very clearly Jesus intends for the shared relationship we experience as members of God's family to be the means of advancing His Gospel. That is why He says, in the discourse in the Upper Room, in John 13,

³⁵ *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Without love in the church the church becomes a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.² We become a message without a meaning. Through being the church, being God's family and loving one another as brothers and sisters, and in loving God together, the Gospel itself is advanced.

² 1 Corinthians 13:1

It is advanced not only by our being through fellowship, but it is, also, advanced through our doing. Our partnership in the Gospel not only communicates a shared relationship, but, also, a shared mission. That is why Jesus told us, as the church, “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel.” Evangelism is not a solo activity. We are to go out into the world together, with arms locked with one another, to share the Gospel. When the Apostle Paul goes to Philippi, he does not go by himself. He goes with a team of other believers: Silas, Luke, Timothy, and others who were with him.

That is how the Gospel is introduced to this church and it is now a partnership this church has with Paul so they are now, also, going out together for the sake of God’s family, God’s Kingdom, God’s Gospel. Beloved, we need each other in order to advance the Gospel. That is why church is so important. We are not able to fulfill the mission of Christ apart from the church of Christ. We need one another desperately to fulfill this Great Commission God has given to us. Let us not believe for a moment we can fulfill God’s mission for our life apart from a deep relational connection to His church.

Yesterday, we had a party and we invited the church to come to celebrate a wedding my son and future daughter-in-law are going to have next week. It was a wonderful time and I asked Alexander and Kiera to give their testimonies. As I listened to Alexander’s testimony, I thanked God for this church. He shared how he came to know Christ and he talked about when he was little and a conversation I had with him. Then he continued to talk about teachers God had given to him in the church. I recognized the work of the Gospel in my son’s life was not my work or my wife’s work, it was our work and I needed you from the time he was in the nursery to the time through his college years to feed into his life. I would not have been able to do the work of the Gospel apart from you.

Parents, I want to encourage you, one of the reasons why we encourage parents to get involved in church is not so we can say, “We have this many kids involved in our Sunday school program,” because I realize how important it is for your children and for the sake of the future of the family to become involved in church and allow other people in the church to speak Gospel into your children’s lives. This includes adults as well as their peers.

The Gospel is not a solo activity. It is a together activity. Paul glories that God advances His Gospel through our shared partnership and fellowship, a *koinonia*, we have together in this.

Secondly, God advances His Gospel through our hardships. Keep in mind the context as Paul writes. He is writing from a prison in Rome. It has been four years since he has been to Philippi. The members of this church really love Paul and support him spiritually and financially. Rumor abound regarding the trial he endured over the last several years. They are worried. They are asking questions, “Is Paul sick? Is Paul still in prison? Is Paul still alive?”

How elated they must have been to receive this letter. He is alive! They gathered together to listen together to this letter to be read publically. As Paul begins to speak to this church, he does mention, in Verse 7, he is still in prison. But, he spends the first eleven verses telling them how much he loves them.

Imagine receiving a letter from someone you really cared about and you are wondering to find out how they are doing, you would begin to get kind of antsy, “You love us. That is great, but tell us what is happening!” By the time of Verse 12, that is the emotion of the church as they are listening to this letter being read for the first time. He has not told them what has happened in his life. Verse 12 is the report and the meat of this section of this letter for the purpose as to why Paul is writing,

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Of all the things Paul wants the Philippian believers to know, what does Paul center on? What has happened to him has really served to advance the Gospel. Is that not amazing? Is that what Paul wants this group of people who loved him so much and who cared for him, and all of these crazy things have happened to him over the past several years? The one thing he wants them to know is that everything that has happened to him has served for the advance the Gospel because that is all that really matters.

If I were the Apostle Paul, I would have filled them with a bunch of the adventure stories I had. I would have talked about going to Jerusalem. I would have talked about the opposition that met me there, how I was arrested, and how a group plotted; they were going to eat until I was dead. I would have told them how this plot was subverted and how amazing God was in liberating me from the danger. I would have told them how I landed in Caesarea and how I knew of Festus and Felix. All they cared about was keeping me there for their own political gain. I would have told them how I sat in prison for two years. I would have told them how I finally appealed to Caesar and they put me on a boat going to Rome and how I wanted to go to Rome under the pretext of being free to share the Gospel. But, now I was going to Rome as a captive, an arrested prisoner.

I would have told them how, on my way, there was a crazy storm that came up and all the seasoned sailors on the boat were so afraid they wanted to cast themselves into the sea because they believed they were going to die for sure. I would have told them how God gave me a message that everyone would be safe and they needed to stay with the boat, how everyone believed me and they stayed with the boat. But, then there was a huge wreck and all found pieces of wood to float ashore. Wouldn't that be some story? If someone wanted to know what has been happening in my life and you had not told them this story, isn't that a story you would want to tell?

Then I would tell them how we landed on shore and everyone was safe, and how I picked up a piece of firewood and got bit by a poisonous snake latched onto my hand and everybody thought I was going to die. I would tell them how I shook it off into the fire and nothing happened. I would tell how I arrived in Rome.

Wouldn't you want to tell them some of the details? I know that is the kind of interesting stuff I would want people to know about me, but that is not Paul's concern. He only wants them to know that things happened to him and all of them were working out for the advance of the Gospel. That is the most important thing Paul wanted them to know.

I remember a sermon I heard when I was in college. I do not remember much about the sermon except for the main idea. Here is what the pastor said, "Keep the main thing the main thing." I thought that was pretty good. That is what Paul is doing; he is keeping the main thing the main thing and the main thing is Christ. Jesus in the Gospel is his driving passion.

In this short letter, Paul will use the term "Gospel" nine times. In this chapter he will use it five times,

⁵ because of your partnership in the Gospel...;

⁷ ...for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the Gospel;

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel...;

¹⁶ ...I am put here for the defense of the Gospel;

²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...

In addition, Paul uses synonyms for the Gospel over and over again. In Verse 14 he talks about speaking the "Word". In Verse 15, "Some preach Christ". In Verse 17, "proclaim Christ". In Verse 18, "Christ is proclaimed". He uses the word over and over again and he is going to talk about the proclamation of Christ which is the Gospel. Paul is keeping the main thing the main thing and the main thing is Jesus and His Gospel,

¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

There are several different kinds of imprisonment in Rome in the 1st Century. Paul endured that first classic kind of imprisonment in Philippi where he was beaten, thrown into an inner cell, and locked in stocks. There is a big iron door that is shut and locked with a guard standing outside the cell door. We remember how that ended. In the midst of his misery and pain, he is singing praises and hymns to God. God sends an earthquake and the jailer is about ready to

commit suicide. Paul says, “No, don’t. We have not left. We have not escaped. We are still here.” The jailer calls out this great question, a classic Gospel exchange, “What must I do to be saved?”³

Beloved, if you have never asked that question, that is the most important question you can possibly ask in your life: What must I do to be saved? Here is the simplest answer that could possibly be given and it is given in sacred Scripture: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.⁴

That is what happened. This Roman jailer knew nothing of Christ until he heard Paul begin singing of Him in the midst misery and pain in a dark prison cell. He hears about Christ. Paul goes home with him and talks more with him about Christ. He teaches them the Old Testament and that there is a Triune God who created the world and who rules over it in sovereign glory. He teaches him He is a righteous Judge who will judge every person for every sin they have ever committed. He teaches him that God, though, in love and grace, sent his Son Jesus to die upon a cross as a substitute and as a sacrifice for sin. He teaches him that this Jesus was raised the third day, that He declared Himself as Lord, that He ascended into Heaven and He is going to return. Paul told the Roman jailer, “That Jesus, believe on Him and you will be saved,” and the jailer believed and his life was completely altered. I believe that jailer is in the audience as this letter from Paul is being read to the church.

Paul refers to “this imprisonment of mine.” His imprisonment in Rome is different from the one he endured in Philippi some twelve years earlier. This imprisonment is a bit more comfortable, if imprisonment can be comfortable. Paul would have had to rent his own quarters so he likely rented a room. In that rented room, he would have a guard assigned to him. Evidently, this guard would have been a part of the praetorian guard which was the secret service of Caesar. These were nine thousand guys who had the special responsibility to guard Caesar. They were the top-notch guards and they were assigned to Paul because, evidently, Paul was a very important prisoner in Caesar’s view.

Paul would have been physically chained to one of these guards in his rented quarter. They would have probably had six- to eight-hour shifts spending time with the Apostle Paul. Paul wanted to let the Philippi church know his imprisonment had turned out for the advance of the Gospel, particularly to the imperial guard,

¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

These guards heard about this God who created them in His image for the purpose of worship. They heard about sin and righteousness and judgment. They heard about God’s love and grace. They heard how Jesus took their sins into His body. They heard about the grave that could not hold Him. They heard all of the Gospel message in those times they were chained to the Apostle Paul.

Have you heard this message? As you have heard it, have you believed in Jesus as your Savior and your Lord? Have you committed yourself to Him?

How many of the praetorian guard do you believe responded to the Gospel? We do not know, but some certainly did. At the end of this letter, Paul writes,

²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

So, there are some in Caesar’s household who have heard the Gospel, that is the implication I draw from that verse, and they have believed as a result of Paul’s witness. Paul is saying, “As I write to you in Philippi, I want you to know these people in Caesar's household send you their greetings because they are Christians now, too.” That must have thrilled the hearts of these Philippian believers, many of whom used to live in Rome.

In Verse 13 the focus is not on numbers, is it? This focus is simply on proclamation. His focus is, “Here, in the heart of the Roman Empire, Jesus is proclaimed as Lord. In the heart of an empire which says, ‘Caesar is lord,’ and everybody has to be participating in emperor worship, in the heart of this empire where there is a panoply of gods who are celebrated in temples all over the Roman Empire acknowledging the greatness of these other gods, isn’t it

³ Acts 16:23-30

⁴ Acts 16:31

awesome, church of Philippi, that, in Rome, Jesus is proclaimed as King and Lord and Savior? That is all that matters!”

God’s work is to do the converting. It is our work to do the proclaiming. If nothing happens in a work place, the neighborhood, or the sports team in terms of people responding other than, “That in this dark place, these folks are going to hear that Jesus is Savior and Lord and King. That is glory. That is where my joy is.” Paul wanted them to know that everything that has happened to him, all the suffering, has come about to open doors. God uses our hardships to open doors to share with unbelievers.

Paul is not merely saying the Gospel is advanced in spite of our hardships, but he is saying the Gospel is advanced because of our hardship. This is the way God sovereignly works behind trials and difficulties. The principle we learn is: Our chains are God’s keys to open closed doors for the Gospel to be proclaimed. Our chains, our hardships, are God’s keys.

Have you ever wondered how your chains are being used? We all have chains, undoubtedly, in our lives. We have chains of set-backs in plans that drag us down. We have chains of physical disease and physical weakness. We have chains of relational conflict and financial difficulty. We have chains of responsibilities to aging parents or young children. We may want to proclaim the Gospel, but we have these responsibilities holding us back. But, God is telling us, “They are not holding you back. I have given them to you and if I have given them to you they are My keys to open doors. Begin to look for the open doors I bringing to you as a result of these hardships.”

Would Paul have chosen to enter into Rome with his group of missionaries and begin to set up shop in the synagogues, in the temples, and in the marketplaces and begin to share the Gospel that way. Sure, but he is confined to a room and he cannot go out publically. But, here is what he had, he had some guy chained to him 24/7. How long do you suppose it took for the Apostle Paul to broach the subject of the Gospel with one of these praetorian guards as they were locked up to him? How long do you suppose it was before he said, “Hey, let’s talk about God. Let’s talk about your life. Let’s talk about purpose and meaning. Let’s talk about joy. Let’s talk.” It was not long.

How long would I be chained to a person before I opened the conversation up about the Gospel? More than likely, I am not going to be physically chained as Paul was, but how about the chains, as a word picture, as we are connected to our neighbors in our neighborhood. Their house is not picking up and moving and my house is not picking up and moving any time soon. It will be there today and it will be there tomorrow. How long does it take, as I am linked together with these folks, before I share the Gospel with them?

How about that person who works in the office next to yours? How long will you be chained, linked to a person, before you share the Gospel with them?

How about family members who do not believe? How long will it be before we take that jump and talk with them?

The Apostle Paul says this is God’s opportunity. The application is to look for the doors God opens to us through our suffering to share the Gospel.

God uses our hardships to give courage to other believers. Hardships opens doors to unbelievers to share the Gospel with them, but He also uses our hardships to give courage to other believers,

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

The believers in Rome are like me. They have been shy about proclaiming the Gospel. They had even greater reason because there was real concern about physical imprisonment and worse. When Paul writes his letter to the church in Rome, before he gets to them, he says,

^{1:16} For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...

The temptation is to be ashamed, but Paul is not ashamed of it. He goes into the city and they see he is not ashamed of it, even as he is in prison, and the future is very suspect for Paul. He could be released, but he, also, could be executed. All of this is dependant upon the judge.

Paul says, “Life is truly about Christ and I want to give a living testimony that Christ is victorious.” The persecutions Paul endured were intended to intimidate Paul and intimidate others like Paul from sharing the Gospel, but it had the opposite effect upon the church. It provided a means by which the church could see faith in action and become bolder and more courageous and the Gospel would be advanced because the church was strengthened.

I wonder if our endurance of hardship causes others in the body of Christ to be bolder for Jesus? I pray whatever hardship God would have me to endure would have this very effect. Will you pray that with me?

Third, God advances His Gospel through the selfish motives of other believers. This is a very fascinating part of this letter,

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.

Paul is talking about believers in Rome. This is another part of Paul’s hardships. In other words, there are some filled with selfish ambition, they see he is in prison, and see this as their time to push Paul down so they can pick themselves up in the eyes of others in the church.

These are not false teachers; they are teaching sound doctrine and they are teaching the true Gospel, but their heart-motives are not God-centered. Their motives are self-centered. They believe the church is for them, about them, and for their own advancement and comfort.

One commentator observes, “They were not anti-Christ. They were anti-Paul.” Paul is in prison for the sake of the Gospel. He loves everyone in this church, yet some of those brothers he loves are using Paul’s imprisonment as an opportunity to gain loyalty, allegiance, and love from people who love Paul for themselves, to take people’s hearts away from Paul.

That would be painful, would it not? It would not be difficult to know that is what is happening. What does Paul say about them,

¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

In other words, there is intentional pain they are bringing to Paul for self-advancement and self-promotion. They are very territorial and petty in their view of ministry. I expect Paul to lay out this big hammer. He is writing to a church that loves him and he knows if he told them to hold these people with resentment or condemn them, they would be right there with him,

¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

That is astonishing! That is incredible! Paul does not gripe and moan and engage in some pity party. He knows God holds the ends in His hands and he trusts himself to God. He could have complained and he could have rallied his supporters. He could have fueled the fires of resentment against those who were intentionally hurting him, but he asks, “What then? Only that...” Paul is keeping the main thing the main thing.

He confirms these people are proclaiming the true Gospel and he is thankful for that. That is all that really matters because it is not about Paul, but it is about Christ.

How bad was his opposition? There is evidence it really, really, really hurt Paul. In 2 Timothy 1, he writes,

¹⁶ May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, ¹⁷ but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me...

The idea here is there were enough people preaching for false motives who were gathering the church away from Paul that the church lost track of Paul altogether. When Onesiphorus came, because he was concerned and he was not ashamed of Paul's chains, he was asking the church members, "Where do you think the Apostle Paul is?" "We do not know." The subtext of that comment is, "We do not care." Do you think that hurt?

There was a Christian from Rome, who wrote a letter to the church in Corinth in 90 AD, by the name of Clement. He is not inerrant, so we do not know if this is absolutely the true, but he writes from his perspective, some thirty years after these events, "Paul was executed because of jealousies within the church." They hurt Paul enough to lead the Roman authorities to have boldness in executing Paul. What was Paul's perspective, "It is not about me, only that in every way Christ is advanced."

Fourth, God advances His Gospel through the loving motives of other believers. There is a sweetness here,

¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

How encouraging these friends must have been. How strengthening it is to have faithful friends in ministry we do not believe evil reports and who are not swayed by smooth talking people and who lead others, like Paul, who simply have a passion for the name of Christ.

Paul is not a robot. He is a human and he is hurting as he writes this section. It pains him that brothers he has loved have turned against him in envy and strife and they are lashing out and hurting him for no cause whatsoever. But, he is drinking in this love he receives from the other brothers.

In Philippians 2:19-30, Paul will write about Timothy,

¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰ For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. ²³ I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, ²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

²⁵ I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, ²⁶ for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹ So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰ for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Paul mentions these two people by name with a view that these are people whom he recognizes God has given to him to encourage him in this dark hour. God is advancing the Gospel through these friends, through the pure and faithful motives of believers. Thank God for these folks.

There are two applications. First, praise God for Gospel friends whom God provides for you. Do not be embittered by the friends who fail you but be refreshed by those who stand with you, particularly in relationship to the Gospel work.

Second, be a Timothy and be an Epaphroditus to God's faithful servants. Do not be taken in by corrupt communication that bends your heart away from the loyal love to those who share a passion for the Gospel. Be a Timothy and an Epaphroditus.

I began this message talking about Jackson, his being my joy and his progress of his tennis game and how fun it is to be a part of it. I recognize God's focus is not on the progress of Jackson's tennis game. It is on the progress of the Gospel,

¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

This passage turns the question and the interest upside down and on its head. It causes me to ask, “How is it Jackson and I share this joy together? How does our involvement in tennis together advance the Gospel?” That is the main thing. Maybe it is because Jackson is participating in the sport and he will be able to become friends with others who participate in the sport and he will be able to share the Gospel. Maybe we are learning something about our spiritual life through this? Maybe we are learning about patience, love, honesty when it is easy to call a ball on the line, “out”, when we do not know if it is exactly out, but it kind of looked like it was because we needed that point.

There are all kinds of things that advance the Gospel. How does this enjoyment advance the Gospel? That is the main and that is what we, as believers, are called to ask consistently about every other pursuit. “College student, you are pursuing a college degree. Why?” How does that advance the Gospel? You may say, “I am pursuing a college degree so I can get a good job after I finish that college degree so I can raise a family.” Those are fine motives, except, if the Gospel is not the main thing then you are missing out on the main thing. How does that advance the Gospel?

You are dining in a restaurant. Why? Is it because you like the food there? Great, but how does that advance the Gospel? Maybe there is a waiter or waitress or chef or another person in the restaurant with whom God would have you share the Gospel. You must ask: How does this advance the Gospel because the Gospel is the main thing.

You are getting your haircut at the barbershop? How does this advance the Gospel?

You are getting married next weekend. Why are you getting married, “Well, you know. You know why we are getting married. It is because we love each other.” How does that advance the Gospel because that is the issue behind everything.

You are building a new home. You are beginning a new job. You are cleaning water out of your basement. You are baking a cake. You are shopping in Grand Prairie. In all of these things it is vital for us, if we make the main thing the main thing, to say, “How does this advance the Gospel?” If it does not advance the Gospel we must ask ourselves, “Should I be a part of it because something is going to change?”

We are living in a country that is sinking fast into spiritual dissolution and darkness. What will change? The only thing possible to change is not looking for the Supreme Court to change or for Congress to change or for the President to change. We must look for change in the church. The church has to make the main thing the main thing and the main thing is Christ or all is lost. But I can tell you, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.⁵

⁵ Philippians 1:21