

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 2021

SERMON: REMEMBER THE PURPOSE

TEXT: PHILIPPIAN 1:12-18

In his book “Making It Happen,” Charles Paul Conn tells the story of a preacher who was in Atlanta, and noticed in the restaurants section of the Yellow Pages, an entry for a place called Church of God Grill. The peculiar name aroused his curiosity and he dialed the number. A man answered with a cheery, “Hello! Church of God Grill!”

The preacher asked how that restaurant had been given such an unusual name, and the man said: “Well, we had a little mission down here, and we started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. Well, people liked the chicken, and we did such a good business, that eventually we cut back on the church service. After a while we just closed down the church altogether and kept on serving chicken dinners. We kept the name we started with, and that’s Church of God Grill.”

Source: *Making it Happen*, Charles Paul Conn

Have you ever found it difficult to stay focused on a job that you were doing? Perhaps it was a nice day and you are stuck inside, or the truth of the matter was that the job you were doing was tedious, boring, or you just weren’t feeling like working. I have often struggled with this...I would hope that something would come along and give me an excuse to change course.

Sometimes we can lose focus on a task because of really good, beneficial occurrences and events. It is hard to say “NO” because it is for a good cause. The ministry and purpose of the church can very easily be sidetracked by very good causes and today we see how Paul reminds the Philippians of their purpose when Paul’s own circumstances could have easily distracted their work.

Let’s begin with our text today: Philippians 1:12-18:

¹² And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. ¹³ For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God’s message without fear.

¹⁵ It’s true that some are preaching out of jealousy and rivalry. But others preach about Christ with pure motives. ¹⁶ They preach because they love me, for they know I have been appointed to defend the Good News. ¹⁷ Those others do not have pure motives as they preach about Christ. They preach with selfish ambition, not sincerely, intending to make my chains more painful to me. ¹⁸ But that doesn’t matter. Whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached either way, so I rejoice. And I will continue to rejoice.

In the Roman Empire, letter writing was a sought-after skill. There were schools dedicated to the art of letter writing. When you look at examples of letters that have been discovered from this time period, you will often see patterns emerge in content, form, and style depending on the context.

As we read through much of the New Testament authored by Paul, we need to remind ourselves that what we have from Paul were actually known as “epistles” or letters. At times this can complicate our understanding of scripture due to the fact that Paul is responding to a letter that he had received and the plain fact of the matter is that we don’t have this other letter. We only have one side of the conversation and we have to understand what Paul is dealing with by how he answers the letter.

As we begin reading the Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi, it takes on a very traditional form. There is the necessary greetings and niceties that you would put within a letter, but then we have a bit of a surprise.

The next part of the letter normally would be where Paul informs his friends about how “HE” is doing. Paul is incarcerated in Rome and literally fighting for his life. Perhaps the people were wanting to know if he was comfortable or if he was

being well treated. They would want to know his needs and how is doing physically. Paul surprises them by deviating from the normal content of the letter and he turns their attention to the work that they share as brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus...the work of preaching the gospel message. His concern is not “how are you doing?” but rather “how is the gospel work going?”

To Paul, it is not his well being that is important. He was well aware of the struggles that he would face when he became a champion for Jesus. His has physically, emotionally, and spiritually been tried and tested. He has been abused, jailed, stoned and run out of town. What was probably the severest blow he could face was the betrayal by some of his brothers and sisters in churches that he had founded. He had poured his heart and soul into their spiritual growth and well-being, only to have some of his closest friends be swayed by false teachers. All this abuse and pain does not sway Paul from his mission of preaching the Good New of Jesus Christ.

TODAY

There are many examples in 2021 of why the church needs to heed Paul’s teachings in Philippians. As we continue to struggle in the age of lockdowns and pandemics, the North American church can have a tendency to whine and complain that life is not fair. This can be surprising at times because, for many of us, we have lived through a period of time in our country where Christianity and the Church had much of the authority and power. The church was the place to be if you were a “good person” and when the church said no to something happening in society, society often paid attention. The pendulum has swung to the other side. The church is often reviled and mocked. People who hold to biblical values are considered to be less intellectual and should not be heard. Several major law societies in Canada deemed graduates from a specific Christian University would not be accepted as lawyers as they held to Christian code of conduct. The reality is that complacency has taken over many self-proclaimed followers of Jesus to the point where church attendance has dropped to an all-time low and regular attendance is considered once or twice a month (unless there is something we would rather do). We hear all this and forget that centuries ago, Jesus told us:

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first. ¹⁹ The world would love you as one of its own if you belonged to it, but you are no

longer part of the world. I chose you to come out of the world, so it hates you. ²⁰ Do you remember what I told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you.

The Philippians were all too aware of the realities of persecution. They lived with the threat of punishment daily in the Roman culture. A key foundation of Paul's teaching was the fact that when life becomes difficult. When our beliefs and way of life are threatened, Paul would encourage us to look for how God might be working in such circumstances to advance the gospel in our lives or in the lives of others.

A powerful tool we have to understand how God works in trials is the testimony of those who have lived before us. We start with biblical examples like the apostles and move forward through history. Look and see what God accomplished through the humility of Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta. Read biographies like "The Hiding Place." The story of Corrie ten Boom and her family who were arrested by Hitler's regime and sent to the concentration camps. When all seemed darkest, God used Corrie to further the gospel...even in the face of unspeakable evil. Read the book "Joni." It is the biography of Joni Eareckson Tada who at the age of 18 dove into the Chesapeake Bay at the wrong spot and became a paraplegic. Her story is inspirational how God took a tragic situation and a willing heart, and the gospel message went forward.

How do we keep our purpose of introducing people to Jesus on track? We need to recognize the many things (good and bad) that vie for our spiritual attention. Jesus, himself, gave us our purpose when he left the earth in Matthew 28:18-20:

¹⁸ Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The battle cry of the Church of Jesus Christ needs to be ***“Is the Gospel being preached?”***! There are many wonderful endeavors that the church is involved. We need to take care that the programs we put our time and effort into have a foundation based on the gospel message. One of the trickiest undertakings is the church’s involvement in issues of social justice. “Pastor, didn’t Jesus tell us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, help the helpless?” Absolutely! The slope becomes slippery when social justice becomes the sole focus of a church to the extent that it becomes divorced from the Great Commission. Our first responsibility is to “go and make disciples.” We engage in acts of social justice, but it must always stay tied to the importance of the person and work of Jesus.

IS GOD SOVEREIGN?

Answer this question for yourself. **“How big is your God?”** When we get to the root of our purpose, many of our responses and reactions are rooted in our belief (or lack thereof) in the sovereignty of God. Do you truly believe that God has a plan and purpose for his created? Do you believe that God will accomplish what he has promised to do regardless of circumstances? **“How BIG is your God?”**

There are certain beliefs and theologies that I believe are heretical. I can’t stand a prosperity gospel that tickles the ears of the neediest in society with false promises of riches and wealth. I also need to realize that this desire to battle false teaching must be rooted in the Great Commission. It would be too easy to fall into the trap of preaching sermon after sermon on why this belief system is wrong that I forget that my purpose as a pastor and a Christian is to sing praises to all who will listen about the mighty God I serve. Paul told the Philippians this when he recognized that there were those teachers and pastors who had “put his arms in chains” and tried to destroy his ministry. It would have been easy for Paul to go on a vendetta against these “enemies” but he recognized that God was so great, that He could use even false teaching to advance kingdom goals. Too often our ministries become ministries of “defense.” We are going to go to war for God and protect his identity and good name. We forget that God really doesn’t to be defended. He has called us to go on the offense for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Paul actually saw his imprisonment as something that benefited the kingdom of God. Being in prison wasn’t good – but God used it to grow his kingdom. What matters most to Paul is not personal circumstances but whether or not the gospel is going forward. If it is, then we should rejoice.

CONCLUSION

Is our God big enough? As we wade through the unusual, sometimes tragic circumstance of our lives individually and corporately, may we always recognize that nothing can hamper God's work. The church has always thrived in the worst possible circumstances and there is no reason to believe that He has stopped working now.

Paul was encouraging the Philippians and also the modern church to connect our Joy to the advancement of the gospel rather than to our physical realities. We are to connect our joy to the gospel even if we are met with hostility and negativity from the world around us. The gospel remains firm even when circumstances stand against us.

Paul does not give us simple answers and solutions to the problems of pain and suffering and Paul would never deny that life can be hard to live. Paul does remind us the God is at work and offers hope of the day when pain will end and that God will redeem all those who have put their trust and faith in Jesus. May we always understand and act our God-given purpose until we see Jesus face to face.

Let's pray...