

**Book:** *Philippians*  
**Series:** *Rejoice in the Lord!*  
**Lesson 4:** *A Godly Perspective on Challenges*  
**Text:** Philippians 1:12-18a  
**Date:** September 15, 2013 (SF)  
September 29, 2013 (ABF)

*Colonial Hills*  
**ABF**  
*Baptist Church*

### Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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**Next Lesson:** Philippians 1:18b-26



### TEACHING TIP

The next two lessons are going to deal with *perspective*. How do you view challenges in your gospel-ministry? How do you view unknowns in life? What's your perspective on those things? Our default mode is to resist the former and worry about the latter. In our next two passages, Paul exemplifies a Christian perspective on challenges (1:12-18a) and the unknown (1:18b-26), a perspective that grounds his joy (1:18).

MacArthur summarizes these two passages with “The Joy of Ministry” and outlines them this way:

- In Spite of Trouble—As Long as Christ's Cause Progressed
- In Spite of Detractors—As Long as Christ's Name Was Proclaimed
- In Spite of Death—As Long as the Lord Was Glorified
- In Spite of Being in the Flesh—As Long as the Church Was Benefited

### INTRODUCTION

When life hands you lemons, what do you do? Make lemonade? Or chuck them right back? Our passage deals with challenges in ministry and asks, in essence, “When ministry hands you lemons, what do you do?”

This passage naturally flows from the previous eleven verses and forces us to consider how serious we really are about:

1. Verse 5 — participating in the gospel
2. Verse 11 — living to the glory and praise of God

Neither of those things is easy, especially in a broken world where challenges abound. So, when those challenges come, what do you do with them? How do you view them? What do you do when things don't go your way in gospel-ministry? Do you "make lemonade," trusting God's providence in those challenges and following Him still? Or do you "chuck them right back," allowing them to be an excuse for living to your own glory and participating in your own agenda?

In this passage, Paul speaks candidly about his challenges, but he also reveals how he viewed them. From Paul, we learn that the key to dealing with ministry challenges is perspective. We try to participate with people in the gospel—corporately living for God's glory, mutually evangelizing our community, privately admonishing one another, edifying each other in small groups, "striving together for the faith of the gospel" (v. 27)—challenges will be real, and they won't go away. But whether they compel or cripple us will be determined by the way we view them, by our perspective.

*We need to cultivate a godly perspective on challenges.* To help us do that, let's consider from this passage two general kinds of challenges and four benefits of challenges.

## KINDS OF CHALLENGES

We noted in our first overview lesson that one of the themes of this book is the challenges that face those who would pursue Jesus. In this passage, Paul highlights two that we will generally categorize.

### 1. ***Persecution against your ministry (vv. 12-14)***

Paul recalls "what has happened to me" (v. 12), and Melick reminds us what that included:

Before you read the following quote, ask your students to rehearse what "things had happened" to Paul recently.

*The Greek text says simply "the things to me" (ta kat' eme). Most likely he included all the events from his imprisonment at Jerusalem through his imprisonment at Rome. These were the riot, the two-year imprisonment at Caesarea, the appeal to Caesar, the threat on his life, the trip to Rome with its shipwreck, his house-arrest and restricted freedom, and the impending trial.<sup>1</sup>*

In the following verses, Paul summarizes all that with the event that served as the climax of such persecution—"imprisonment" (3x). He writes this book and the rest of the Prison Epistles (i.e., Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) while under imprisonment in Rome. Other elements of persecution and suffering alluded to in this letter include death (1:20-21; 2:30; 3:10), illness (2:26-27), and destitution (3:8; 4:12).

Paul confirmed in 2 Timothy 3:12, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." This is merely what Jesus affirmed in John 15:18-20 (cf. Matthew 10:16-25).

*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*

Paul's incredible list of persecutions in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, then, should not surprise us. Although we live in a religious context where persecution is mainly a remote possibility, the reality of it provides a challenge for all of God's people.

Things won't always go your way in ministry. People and circumstances will conspire against you as obstacles in your path and seeming deterrents from your mission. At those times, when ministry hands you lemons, what will you do?

## 2. *People within your ministry (vv. 15-18a)*

It has often been remarked, somewhat jokingly, that “ministry would be great if it weren’t for the people.” In this passage, Paul talks about some of those people—some of those so-called “partners in the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> And he admits plainly that they can “indeed” (v. 15—the idea is “to be sure” or “it is true”) create challenges.

### a. *They can have sinful motives (vv. 15, 17a, 18a).*

Paul acknowledges that these people are “speak[ing] the Word without fear” (v. 14) and “preach[ing] Christ” (v. 15). So, their mission (“speak” and “preach”), message (“the Word” and “Christ”), and manner (“without fear”) are correct, but their motives are sinful. In other words, they did the right thing, but for the wrong reasons.

Paul cites “envy” (v. 15), “rivalry” (v. 15), and “selfish ambition” (v. 17) as the motives underlying their ministry. He further says that they are “not sincere” (v. 17), but accomplish their ministry “in pretense” (v. 18). To summarize, their motives are completely contrary to the unity that forms a key theme in this letter.

“Envy” or jealousy and “selfish ambition” describes the character of their heart, while “rivalry” or strife indicates its byproduct. All three character traits are included in the “works of the flesh” list in Galatians 5:20-21, and they depict the heart of a condemned unbeliever (Romans 1:29; 2:8; Titus 3:3) or false teacher (1 Timothy 6:4). This is the point Paul makes when he indicts the Corinthian Christians for the “strife” (rivalry) that existed among them. He asks, “Since there is still jealousy and dissension among you,

Before you begin to explain these motives, ask your students to identify them in them text.

are you not influenced by the flesh and behaving like unregenerate people?” (1 Corinthians 3:3, NET). Paul feared that when he visited those believers he would discover “quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:20). Therefore, since such godless motivates are not becoming the people of God, we should be diligent to put them away from us (Romans 13:13; Titus 3:9).

The phrases “not sincerely” (v. 17) and “in pretense” (v. 18) describe the deception with which these difficult partners ministered. Lacking sincerity, they were duplicitous, indicating one thing while hoping for another. There were play-acting (cf. this word in Luke 20:47; Acts 27:30), pretending to be partners, while they acted more like enemies.

How do these sinful motives manifest themselves in your own ministry through what you say, think, do?

**Application:** We are wise to pause a moment to consider the implications of these delineated motives in our own experienced ministry conflicts. Paul’s experience here complements what Scripture teaches, that many people-problems can be traced to self-centered, proud, hypocritical motives. Proverbs 13:10 reminds us that “by pride comes nothing but strife” (KJV), and James 3:16 records, “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:16). The “strife” and “disorder” in your ministry context is likely due to arrogant and selfish motives in either you or others. If in you, admit that you are the problem, confess your unchristlike motives to God and perhaps others, repudiate those motives as being unacceptable and destructive (cf. 1 Peter 2:1), remember that Christ is the one Lord and Head over all His work, and ask God to help you cultivate a heart of humility, edification, and service

through the ministry of His Word (cf. 1 Peter 2:2). If in others, simply recognize that such challenges have always been a part of ministry and that your perspective at such a time will determine what kind of opportunities the challenge affords.

**b. They can be simply mean (v. 17b).**

Some fellow-Christians will do the right thing (“preach Christ”) the wrong way (“afflict” Paul). Paul adds in verse 17 that these believers were “thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.” The word “thinking” means “to consider something to be true but with a component of tentativeness: think, suppose, expect[, imagine].”<sup>3</sup> They were purposeful in what they were doing; they were really trying to make life difficult for Paul. Paul, however, in using this word shares that from his own perspective, they just weren’t successful. They had failed to account that joy is always a choice that cannot be robbed by circumstances or people.

“Afflict” refers to oppression, persecution, or tribulation (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:8; Hebrews 10:33). Thus, these believers were actually persecuting Paul, when they should have been partnering with (1:5, 7) and praying (1:19) for him. And they were afflicting Paul “in [his] imprisonment.” In other words, they were beating a dead horse; they were kicking him while he was down.

**Illustration:** A short review of the blogosphere will unveil a host of Christian websites proclaiming themes of grace, the gospel, and Christ in their titles and “about” pages, but laced with anger, bitterness, rivalry, strife, and hypocrisy in their content (cf. blogs passing judgment [sometimes anonymously] on Pastor Phelps during the Tina Anderson situation). Such blogs seem to be a contemporary parallel to Paul’s situation that we read about in this text.



**Application:** Before we consider our next point, which will really fuel our godly perspective on challenges, what motivations do the following passages give us for persevering through the difficulties of persecution and people in our gospel-ministry? 2 Thessalonians 1:6 — God will vindicate us; Matthew 5:10-12 — God will reward us; Matthew 5:43-48 — God is love

**Transition:** We need to cultivate a godly perspective on challenges. Understanding the kinds of challenges that we will face helps us be prepared to do so with godly perspective. Such a perspective is enhanced further when we consider the benefits of challenges.

### BENEFITS OF CHALLENGES

Those who participate in the gospel (v. 5) and live “to the glory and praise of God” (v. 11) have a different perspective on challenges. Since they are merely ambassadors and their life is not their own, they are not thwarted or excused when difficulties come. Instead, they see the benefits afforded by challenges. Paul models here such a perspective. For him, challenges offered one key opportunity that he summarizes in two phrases:

- “to advance the gospel” (v. 12) — offensive
- “for the defense of the gospel” (v. 16) — defensive

This gospel-centrality is nothing new to Paul’s thinking, and thus his viewpoint on challenges is not surprising. Those who fail to accept the gospel’s mission for their life will have a difficult time adopting the mindset that Paul models here. Paul, however, gives us good reason to share his confident perspective on gospel-ministry even in spite of its challenges. He starts verse 12 with “I want you to know, brothers.” This is similar to Pastor Phelps saying “Get it!” in the middle of his sermon 😊 and demonstrates the concern Paul had that these believers don his same perspective on the challenges of ministry. And the very thing that he wanted them to “get” was that what some saw as merely an

obstacle (i.e., the challenges of persecution and people), he knew to “really” (v. 12—the word means “rather,” stressing the opposite of what was supposed; in the vernacular, “contrary to popular opinion”) be an opportunity (cf. Genesis 50:20).

This faith-filled, spiritually-confident perspective that Paul models here was based on four benefits that he saw in the midst of challenges.

### 1. ***Our testimony is clarified (v. 13).***

The grammar of verses 12-14 indicates that Paul is here sharing two aspects of the gospel’s advance in spite of his imprisonment. First, the believers’ testimony was clarified. After Paul’s imprisonment, all those watching him (“the whole imperial guard and...all the rest”) knew (Gk. “made clear, visible, evident”) that it was “for Christ.” Paul himself was convinced that He was there in the providence of God (v. 16—“I am put [appointed, destined] here for the defense of the gospel”), and now everyone else does, too.

This spiritual benefit is what caused Tertullian to issue the famous assessment that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Whereas one or two days in prison didn’t diminish Paul’s joy, neither did it prove that Jesus Christ was its source. However, when weeks had turned into months and the apostle was still locked in (pardon the pun) with hopeful expectation on his mission, the reality of what (and Who) he proclaimed was underlined, and the testimony of his faith was authenticated. The result was spiritual fruit (cf. 4:22).

Martyrdom is the extreme form of ministry challenge, and it has indeed been instrumental in the growth of the church. However, any ministry-challenge provides an opportunity for our testimony to be verified. Our identity as Jesus’ followers becomes crystallized to all who are watching.

**Illustration:** In what ways has this been true in our own church’s experience since the challenge of the 7/27 bus accident?

### 2. ***Our witness is emboldened (v. 14).***

The second way in which the gospel advanced was that fellow-believers were emboldened in their witness. The Lord used Paul’s imprisonment to increase (“much more”) their “confidence in the Lord” (i.e., “to be so convinced that one puts confidence in something”<sup>4</sup>—in trials, we see the sufficiency of Christ to an extended degree and learn to trust Him), so that with “boldness” (i.e., “to show boldness or resolution in the face of danger, opposition, or a problem: dare, bring oneself to [do something]”<sup>5</sup> and without “fear” they could “speak the Word.”

**Illustration:** In what ways has this been true in our own church’s experience since the challenge of the 7/27 bus accident?

### 3. ***Our Christ is proclaimed (vv. 15-18a).***

In verse 18, Paul asks the simple question that we could translate, “What for?” What’s the result of the people-problems of verses 15-17? The answer is, “In every way...Christ is proclaimed.”

**Illustration:** Teachers, please be careful in wording this illustration. The intention is certainly not to demean a fellow gospel-preaching local church, but to depict the faithfulness of our own pastor to see the opportunity to proclaim Christ in a challenging situation, when many others overlook that opportunity. You may want to share this illustration generally, leaving out church names; if you feel that the point will be graciously understood, then feel free to share it in its entirety.

Immediately after our church experienced the bus accident, we began collaborating as a church family (led by our pastor) on how we could use this tragedy as an opportunity (thus, the term “trage-tunity”) to proclaim Christ and His gospel. Our “Bus Accident Memorial” webpage<sup>6</sup> chronicles our endeavor, clearly and repeatedly

pointing people to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Contrast that seizing of an opportunity to proclaim Christ with the following article posted as a lone response to a tragic situation experienced by another church family.<sup>7</sup>

*For many of us, the reality of this tragedy is still sinking in as our minds and spirits try to grapple with such an agonizing loss. Often, our initial responses come in the form of questions: "How could this happen?" "What do I do next?" "How can I help those who are hurting?" As a church family, we continue to call out to God for His comfort, mercy and presence to cover all those who have been deeply impacted by [this individual's] death. We also ask God for continued strength for those who are extending arms of grace and compassion at this time.*

*What we do know is that even in the darkest and most confusing circumstances, God loves us, and He is with us. We thank you for the depth and magnitude of support and offers of assistance, which have literally been voiced from around the world.*

I thank God for my own church and pastor who had a godly perspective on painful challenge and viewed it as an opportunity to proclaim Christ to a greater degree and a wider audience than before.

Back in our text, Paul demonstrates in verses 15-18 that seeing this particular benefit in challenges is not without its difficulties, for conflict forces us to consider what is most important:

- ***People (i.e., picking sides) or a Person (i.e., proclaiming the Savior)*** — We probably would have excused Paul if he had decided to distance himself from these contentious preachers and allied himself with the more supportive ones. Paul, however, practiced what he preached (2:1-4) and

put the cause of Christ before his own (1:27). He concentrated on the pleasure of One rather than the approval of the many, and thus he prioritized proclaiming Christ over picking sides. He didn't pick sides and he didn't let others back him into that corner. To him, the only side was Christ's, and he rejoiced over those who proclaimed Christ, no matter what kind of a team player they were (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-31).

- ***Motives or Message*** — Remember, these fellow-ministers were persecuting Paul, when they should have been partnering with him. Paul himself knew and unveiled their motives. In today's world, that was more than enough cause to repudiate those people, expose them on the internet, gossip about them at the next conference, and generally afflict their ministry (which was what they were doing to Paul). But, from his perspective, they were still all on the same team, because they all shared the same message—Christ. He was the "bigger man," who saw the improper motives in others, but refused to accept them for himself, all the while rejoicing over those people for their positive ministry for Christ (cf. Romans 12:18). Since the message was getting out, he felt no need to pass judgment, and he left accountability to God (cf. Romans 14:4).

What humility is then needed to see and capitalize upon this benefit of challenges! What repudiating of our pride, agenda, and sense of fairness! What commitment to the cause of Christ in all and over all! What resolve to practice unity towards those who are undermining it!

**Illustration:** Warren Wiersbe shares the following illustration:

*It is a matter of historic record that the two great English evangelists, John Wesley and George Whitefield, disagreed on doctrinal matters. Both of them were very successful, preaching to thousands of people and seeing multitudes come to Christ. It is reported that somebody asked Wesley if he expected to see Whitefield in heaven, and the evangelist replied, “No, I do not.”*

*“Then you do not think Whitefield is a converted man?”*

*“Of course he is a converted man!” Wesley said. “But I do not expect to see him in heaven—because he will be so close to the throne of God and I so far away that I will not be able to see him!”<sup>8</sup>*

**Application:** Sometimes, we need to “just not go there.” There will undoubtedly be people in ministry whose methodology is inferior in our thinking or whose motives are questionable. While he didn’t like it or seek to justify it, Paul just refused to go there or be forced to issue judgment. He simply rejoiced in the reality that Christ was being proclaimed, and he simply made sure that he was doing his part to accomplish that goal, as well. That decision requires a lot of humble self-control (to keep from saying what we’re tempted to), a lot of 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love (i.e., patient, hoping all things, bearing all things, rejoicing in the truth, keeping no record of wrong, etc.), and a lot of reminding oneself of the bigger cause—Jesus Christ and His mission.

People may be a challenge to us in our gospel-ministry, but it may simply be an opportunity for us to ensure (to others and to ourselves) that Jesus and His agenda (not our own) is being proclaimed.

Consider generally asking, “What are we learning from this point?” Or, “What qualities are needed to think this way?”

#### 4. ***Our joy is grounded (v. 18a).***

The final benefit of these ministerial challenges was that, with the previous three benefits being enjoyed, Paul’s joy was now grounded. Considering the fact that his testimony was clarified, believers’ witness was emboldened, and Christ was proclaimed, Paul could now say, “In that I rejoice.” Thus, this reasonable joy can only be known (v. 12) when you cultivate a godly perspective on challenges.

#### **CONCLUSION**

So, “When ministry hands you lemons, what do you do?” We’re called to participate in the gospel (v. 5) and live to the glory and praise of God (v. 11). What do you do when those tasks are challenged by persecution or problems? What’s your perspective on challenges? Challenges are certainly unavoidable, but they’re not unprofitable. To the contrary, a godly perspective on challenges sees the beneficial opportunities they provide and seizes them. *May God help us cultivate a godly perspective on challenges.*

#### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 70.

<sup>2</sup> It’s important to note that the text indicates that these people were indeed fellow-believers. They were not false teachers or Judaizers, for Paul used other harsher language for those people. These were “brothers” (v. 14), who spoke the Word (v. 14) and proclaimed Christ (v. 15). However, similar to Paul’s descriptions of false teachers in his letters, he is not at all specific about the details of their ministry or antagonism towards him. In being general, Paul helps us make contemporary application to similar people/situations.

<sup>3</sup> William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 701.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 792.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1010.

<sup>6</sup> [www.colonialindy.org/bus-accident-memorial](http://www.colonialindy.org/bus-accident-memorial)

<sup>7</sup> [gracechurchin.org/remembers-doug](http://gracechurchin.org/remembers-doug)

<sup>8</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996).