

Philippians: Every Opportunity
Sermon 9-16-18
Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Philippians 1:12–18a

¹²I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. ¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Message:

To start today, I'm going to read a story about Yang Hua, "Yang Hua's wife, Wang Hongwu, came to pick him up on Dec. 20, 2015, from the detention center in China where he had been held since Dec. 9 for his involvement with Living Stone Church, also known as Huoshi Church. But instead of signing paperwork and bringing her husband home, Wang Hongwu witnessed four men from 'Detention Management' throw Yang Hua in an unmarked van. Yang Hua (also known as Li Guoshi, his legal name) serves as a pastor of the Living Stone Church in the southwestern city of Guiyang, China. He is a third-generation pastor and is no stranger to persecution. His father spent time in jail in the late 1960s for his Christian faith. Yang Hua has also been detained before. The church has been the subject of government harassment since it was founded in 2009 by Yang Hua and Pastor Su Tianfu. In that time, the church grew from approximately 20 to more than 700 members. Authorities have continued to pressure the church to join the government-sanctioned Three-Self Movement or face destruction. Members are monitored, interrogated, and prohibited from attending prayer groups. Yang Hua was transferred to criminal custody on December 22. After his arrest was approved in January, he was accused of 'divulging state secrets,' but given no trial date. His wife and his two lawyers were initially denied permission to visit him. When they were finally permitted to visit, they observed prison officials' harsh treatment and Yang Hua's poor health. Recently, Yang Hua reported that government

prosecutors have threatened his life, along with those of his wife and children, and stomped on his feet in an effort to force his cooperation. One of the prosecutors told him, 'I am a torture expert. I know how to beat you up without leaving a mark on your body for people to see. Doctors won't be able to diagnose you. Even you won't know what you died of.' With the aid of his lawyers, Yang Hua filed a lawsuit against the prosecutors, despite the danger it could cause him. One of his lawyers believes that the pastor was arrested on false charges to intimidate Living Stone Church and that Yang Hua's case demonstrates the arbitrary denial of basic human rights for many Chinese Christians. Though she is caring for the couple's two sons alone, Yang Hua's wife is most concerned about the well-being of Living Stone Church members in their pastor's absence. She worries that the government harassment will cause believers to fall away from their faith. Though the couple faces many personal difficulties ahead and the church faces an uncertain future, they remain committed to the Lord." In a letter to his wife dated June 6, 2016, "...Yang Hua encouraged Wang Hongwu to continue doing the Lord's will through prayer, gratitude, and trust in God's plan, writing, 'Let's pray and leave other things to God.'" In November of 2016, "Yang Hua wrote to his wife from prison on Nov. 8. 'After reading your letter, I know some of your concerns. Praise the Lord ... Never be dejected and despondent, always look up at our Lord, and always keep the spiritual life above the chaos of the real environment. Rest in God's arms. 'Some rely on chariots, some on horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord,' (Psalm 20:7). Be upright and take care. Be prepared for the rest of the road. I will go with you. If the Lord doesn't allow it, not a single hair will drop to the floor.'" In January of 2017 Yang Hua was sentenced. "After secretly trying Yang Hua for 'divulging state secrets,' a judge sentenced the pastor of Living Stone Church on Jan. 5 to two years and six months in prison." In June of this year, "Pastor Yang Hua returned to his home in Guizhou province...after completing a two-and-a-half year jail term. Leading up to his trial, prosecutors tortured him multiple times in an effort to extract a confession. While in prison, Yang contracted vasculitis and had to be hospitalized, as he was unable to walk. He also contracted diabetes. In spite of what he went through, his wife said Yang broke out into loud worship songs after his release. '...His belief remains resolute,' she said." This article comes from "Prisoner Alert", a ministry of Voice of the Martyrs. Voice of the Martyrs also notes that "China continues to arrest, torture and jail Christians associated with illegal house churches as they attempt to control or eliminate all religions. 1.3 billion people inhabit the oldest Communist republic, with an estimated 90 million being Christians. Though many religions are being persecuted, Christians appear to be the hardest hit. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement and The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Society are the government-approved churches where Christians may worship legally. The loyalty of these

groups is first to the government and then the church. Children under the age of 18 may not legally attend any church. Millions of believers choose to worship at illegal house churches rather than register with the government, despite the threat of persecution, torture and prison. China's present crackdown is putting more believers in prison or under detention than in any other country. The confiscation of church property and Bibles continues—even Bibles officially printed by the government. Yet the Church continues to grow with an estimated 3000 Chinese coming to Christ each day.” When I read and hear Yang's story, it brings Paul's story into reality. We often think of Christian imprisonment as something of the past because we don't face that level of persecution here in the US. But if we look beyond the borders of our country, we quickly realize how much we don't understand about persecution.

To understand the value of Paul's words even more, it's important to understand the climate of Paul's imprisonment. At the writing of his letter to Philippi, Paul is believed to be on his first visit to Rome. The gospel had spread so rapidly across the Mediterranean region that the church in Rome was not founded by Peter or Paul, but rather through both Romans and Jewish-Christians alike. There was a strong Jewish presence in Rome at the first spreading of Christianity. And there wasn't much oversight over the Jews. So Christianity spread relatively easily among the synagogues. But the Jewish relationship with Roman authorities was not good. As early as 41 A.D. there are writings claiming disturbances from Jews in Rome. Which eventually lead to the expulsion of Jews in Rome in 41 and a second expulsion in 49. Even before Christianity's strong presence in Rome, there was bad blood between Jews and Roman authorities. By the time of Paul's first time in Rome, Jews, Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians are not in good standing with Roman authorities. And it's a little bit of what I talked about last week, our belief that Christ is King directly challenges the rule of the Roman emperor. A few years after the second Jewish expulsion, Nero, began his rule as emperor. And he had no love for Christians. Nero, is the one who eventually executes Paul and Peter after the Great Fire in Rome in 64 A.D. That's after Paul's second imprisonment in Rome. But the writing of Philippians happens in Paul's first imprisonment. Likely, around 62 A.D. Before the great fire and the great persecution of Christians in Rome.

So why does all this background information matter? I want you to get the picture that spreading Christianity in the Roman empire was no easy and acceptable task. In fact, many were beaten and ridiculed. Some were killed for their belief. We think it's hard to spread the gospel in America. We have no idea. We've never been threatened with our lives over our belief. Despite this hardship though, listen to Paul's words with this information in mind, “¹²I want you to know, beloved that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the

gospel...” Isn’t that ridiculous?!?! In the face of such great hardship, the gospel has spread more! “...most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.” Paul’s imprisonment has become a lightening rod for people to speak about Christ with greater boldness. Maybe some of us should be put in prison to spread the gospel all the more here in America.

Here’s where Paul’s great maturity as a believer shines forth, “¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry...” Paul is not the big dog in town anymore because of his imprisonment, so others spread the gospel for personal gain or fame. “...but others from goodwill. ¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.” So some spread the gospel the “right way” in Paul’s eyes. Others use his imprisonment and his persecution as a stepping stone to gain fame. You would think Paul is trying to uphold those who do it the right way. The righteous way. But Paul surprises us with his response. “¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.” Paul doesn’t care how the gospel is spread, but that the gospel is spread at all. If people are spreading the gospel for personal gain and the gospel spreads, then praise the Lord. If people are defending the gospel fiercely and Paul’s imprisonment and that spreads the gospel, then praise the Lord. What the envious people want is to cause Paul distress and get him to react out of ego. That spreading the gospel is about him. They want him to trip and fall. What the defending people want is to protect Paul’s reputation and the reputation of the gospel. That’s not a bad thing. Although one way is obviously better than the other, Paul praises both.

Paul’s response raises a challenging question, does it matter how the gospel spreads? On the one hand, I think it does matter. Some can misrepresent Jesus and deter others from knowing Christ. On the other hand, if God wants the gospel to spread in a certain area or in a certain neighborhood, God will spread the gospel despite our motives and how we do so. It’s not a perfected science. Some spread the gospel by being incredibly intelligent and have a robust education behind them which equips them to spread the gospel among certain populations. Does everyone have to have a PhD to spread the gospel? No. In fact, they shouldn’t. Actually, those who lack education may be better suited to speak the gospel plainly to people who also live pretty simple lives.

Meditating on this question made me think about all the ways that I’ve cringed at ways people spread the gospel. You know, for a while, I had a certain level of disdain for evangelicalism and reformed theology. In fact, as I’ve stated before, that was a hot topic of discussion for Christine and I at the beginning of

dating. Every time I would hear of a street-corner evangelists, I would cringe. Every time I would hear buzz-phrases like “right-thinking,” “good-theology” and “damned to hell” I would cringe. Every time I would hear someone passionately condemn homosexuals with hateful words like “God hates fags,” again, I would cringe. Even those who passionately condemn abortions claiming that those who “kill” their babies are going to hell, I would cringe. As you can tell, all these approaches to defending the gospel and spreading the gospel are not appealing to me. I would never encourage these approaches. I don’t care for HOW they are spreading the gospel. Does it matter HOW they do it? If the gospel is spreading, does it matter?

One of the things you have to understand about Paul’s letter is that he probably never thought it was going to be part of some great anthology of books, poems and letters that we now call the Bible today. He wrote this letter specifically to a group of people with specific words in mind. Imagine writing a letter to your spouse and a 100 years later it’s analyzed to death and critiqued as some great piece about the nature of relationships during our time period. No, you didn’t have that in mind when you wrote that letter. You were just writing a letter intended just for your wife or husband’s eyes. So I don’t think Paul was trying to make some big theological statement here. Paul is being pastoral to a particular group of people. Just as I am doing with this message today. Does Paul think the “How” in spreading the gospel matters? Of course he does. But if someone is spreading the gospel in an egregiously wrong way, don’t you think God has the power to deal with them somehow?

Most importantly, I think what Paul is emphasizing here is that in every opportunity, we have the opportunity to spread the gospel. Whether we’re in prison or whether we are just going shopping for groceries, we have the opportunity to spread the gospel. Are we being vigilant for those opportunities to spread the gospel? Some of us will have impure motives, others pure motives. Some people in Rome and Philippi were spreading the gospel in a spiteful way against Paul. Others were spreading the gospel in defense of Paul and his righteousness. If the gospel is being spread at all, praise the Lord. You all know how hard it is to spread the gospel among your family, your friends and your neighbors. Is it better to avoid trying? Or to do it in the “wrong” way and despite doing it “wrong” someone still comes to Christ? While I don’t agree with the methods of some evangelistic tactics, I’ve come to the belief that if the gospel is spreading at all because of these tactics, praise the Lord. It’s easy to critique another for trying and doing it the “wrong” way, than to actually roll up our sleeves and try ourselves. If I’m not in the game of spreading the gospel, I have no place critiquing another for trying.

Even in the midst of prison, Paul blesses and encourages others to spread the gospel in every opportunity. Remember that Acts 16 story when Paul and Silas were in prison in Philippi? Upon an earthquake, they converted the jailor instead fleeing for their lives. How many of us would be that committed to spreading the gospel in the midst of hardship? For Paul, his belief in Christ is in his bones. For Yang Hua, even in the midst of being tortured and contracting vasculitis and diabetes for his faith in China, Yang held true to his belief and became a witness for the gospel. What are you willing to do in the name of Jesus? As you go through your week this week, I want to encourage to observe moments in your routine or your interactions with others where you have opportunities to share your faith. It may be with your children. It may be with your spouse. It may be in the work place. It may be with your neighbor. It may be at a restaurant. I'm not saying to force the opportunity, but what opportunities do you have to share the joy of the Lord? To share your testimony? I'm telling you Providence, it doesn't matter if you mess up or you don't express it perfectly. It doesn't matter if your motives are impure or pure. I believe that if your intent is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, God will bless your efforts. You may not witness the growth of your efforts. You may just be planting a seed. But you have exponential opportunities to share the gospel. It can be as simple as a loving gesture or a kind word. In everything you do, I implore you to find ways to share Jesus with others. If Jesus is your first love and Christ is in your bones, you'll see ways to share the gospel with others. I pray that those opportunities would become apparent to you this week. "...that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice." Amen.