

“Credo, Domine; adjuva incredulitatem meam,” Mark 9:24.

“Domine, volumus Jesum videre,” John 12:21.

PHILIPPIANS 1

¹²I want you to know, brothers, that the things which happened to me actually took place to advance the gospel. ¹³And so it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to all the rest, that I am in chains because of Christ. ¹³And, through my chains, the majority of the brothers in the Lord have become much more confident about daring to speak the word of God fearlessly. ¹⁵Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, and others out of good will. ¹⁶The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am placed here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking they can cause trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸What does it matter? Only this, that in every way, whether for outward appearance or for the truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice.



How do we make God’s Word more powerful?

I’ve had a few chances to break up concrete with a sledgehammer in my day. As a kid, we broke down some basement walls and also knocked out some walls in the dorm at the high school where my dad teaches. At one point I remember thinking I was stronger than the others who helped break down that wall, so that I would be better at this than them. But I found that I could not muscle the sledgehammer into breaking the walls. It was more important to learn how to swing the sledgehammer and let the weight of the hammer head do the work.

We learn in Jeremiah that God’s Word is like a hammer that smashes rocks to pieces. How do we make God’s Word more powerful? We cannot muscle it into working. God’s word works on its own. We cannot add to its strength. We swing it, and the hammer does its work.

The closest we could do to help God’s Word along is show weakness. Paul’s bonds and his enemies’ bad motives did not diminish the Word’s power. Surprisingly these things do not make God’s Word any less powerful in the battle between ...

BONDS AND BAD MOTIVES VERSUS THE GOSPEL

1. The gospel overcomes bonds

At the end of the book of Acts, Paul was shipped to Rome and placed in chains or bonds. It wasn't the worst case scenario being under house arrest. He was allowed visitors until his trial as a Roman citizen. One visitor was named Timothy, who stuck with Paul to the end. Another visitor to Paul's house arrest was Epaphroditus, who carried letters from Paul to Christian churches at Ephesus, Colosse, and Philippi. These are the so-called "prison epistles": Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and throw in Philemon.

Ironically, the bonds furthered the gospel. Paul's suffering got people's attention. In jail, everyone claims to be innocent. Paul could claim to be guilty, but not of a crime. He was guilty of proclaiming Christ.

Kind, uncomplaining, even joyful under duress gets people's attention.

When it seems you are being persecuted for your faith, what is your tone? Are you whiny, complainy, and uptight? Do you make demands? I'm not convinced that the apostles in Acts 5 shouted, "We must obey God rather than men," with a whiny tone of voice, or even in outrage. It seems to be a statement of fact, a confession of faith, and a happy shout of rejoicing.

Think of Daniel and his friends and their tone when big government pushed them into sticky situations. They were always respectful towards big government. Or think of King David when he was on the run from King Saul. He always called Saul the Lord's anointed and refused to harm Saul, even when he had the chance. (Later on, he showed Saul his spear and water jug, just so Saul could see how close David came.)

So also Paul in prison, whose bonds held him back, but did not hold back the gospel. Anyone could see he was no criminal worthy of being bound up in chains. Instead, watching Paul had a profound influence on the guards as well as the members of the church in Rome.

What do you suffer? How can you suffer and rejoice as you suffer so that the name of Christ is proclaimed through your suffering?

2. The gospel works despite personal bad motives

Bad motives, even criminal intent, do not make God's Word any less powerful. I warn you not to draw too strong of a conclusion here. Many well-intentioned people allow themselves to be deceived by a bad interpretation on Paul in Philippians 1.

One version of this is known especially in LCMS circles as **gospel-reductionism**. "What is '**gospel-reductionism**'? Basically it's the tendency to reduce the Bible to only the gospel. Gospel reductionism tends to allow the Bible authority only in matters which are explicitly part of the gospel or may be developed from the gospel. In this way, the rest of the Bible is relativized; it does not have the same authority. Instead of the whole Scripture, the tendency is for only the gospel to become the standard (the norm) of Christian teaching. One problem – to know the gospel, you have to know original sin and then you have to know the means of grace, that its power comes packaged in Word and sacrament. Then you realize that there are no insignificant words of Scripture, and it all doesn't just boil down to any one reasonable issue that is satisfying to our minds. True, the gospel is the heart and center. But the gospel does not deny the rest of the Bible.

So many are happy to join in pretend union when there isn't actual agreement on all articles of faith. Is Paul really saying here that it does not matter whether a person preaches Christ purely ... or ... if a person preaches Christ with false doctrine?

Of course not. As the context reveals, Paul is stressing that Christ is preached with a variety of intentions. Some preach Him rightly and purely, out of love; while others preach Him with bad motives—insincerity, envy, and rivalry. But the bad motives/ criminal intent of some preachers does not make their good preaching of Christ evil or powerless. The preacher himself is reprehensible, but his confession of Christ is not.

It remains the power of God to save all who believe. For this reason, "*Only this [matters] that Christ is being proclaimed.*" As sad as it is for the one who proclaims Christ insincerely, we still rejoice over the souls who are led to salvation by him.

Paul confirms this when he writes in Galatians, “*A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump,*” (5:9) and, “*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace*” (5:4). We can clearly see from this that Christ must be preached rightly and purely, for there is also a false Christ.

Therefore if the pastor who baptized you is ever discovered to be crooked or an unbeliever, you may be tempted to doubt the Word and sacrament. Was it really powerful to save me? Is the bread and wine offered to me by the crooked pastor truly the body and blood for my forgiveness? Is the crooked bearer of good news nullify or change that good news? No, it does not. Our criminal intent does not alter the power of the gospel.

As an example of this, I offer the lesson of my favorite martyr, a Roman comedian named Genesius. He lived during the time of a great persecutor of the church, Emperor Diocletian. Genesius would spy on Christian worship so that he could write mocking plays to laugh at Christians later before the emperor. Once when he was mocking baptism, he was the actor who was being baptized. He suddenly realized that the Word was changing his heart, and what was insincere suddenly became sincere. Genesius sprang up and confessed his faith, and everyone laughed. But then he insisted, and the emperor realized he was being honest. So Diocletian had Genesius beaten. Later, when he didn't give up the faith, the emperor had him rolled on nails and roasted with torches, but Genesius insisted on being a Christian. He was finally beheaded. But the blood of martyrs is like unto seed for the Church, and such events only seem to embolden people in the gospel.

Bonds don't matter. Chains don't hold the Bible back. Bad motives are overcome, and criminal intent is confounded. What do we care and what does it matter but that the Word of Christ is preached? **Amen.**

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**