

January 20, 2019

## Lesson 8: Submit to God in Christ

Scripture: Philippians 1:12-21

### Context:

Our next lesson on love focuses on how we submit to God in Christ. We look to the book of Philippians, one of the Pauline epistles, a writing in the New Testament. The particular passage focuses on submitting to God in all circumstances. According to the lesson, we love by focusing on our devotion to Christ in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

The letter to the Philippians speaks to their daily life with suggestions for how to live. Most scholars believe that Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is undisputed in its authorship as the writing contains his writing style from several other Pauline letters.<sup>1</sup> The writing follows the structure of an ancient letter with an address, thanksgiving, a set of instructions, and a conclusion. Letters written to the early church were usually read aloud in the congregation as people assembled for worship.<sup>2</sup> As Paul was trying to keep the Christian movement going, it was important to be connected to the congregations and to know of their issues and their needs. Throughout Philippians there are specific individuals named and there are hymns, confessions, and good conduct lists to help guide the people.<sup>3</sup> Paul knew the people of Philippi and what they needed in order to live.

In this part of the letter, Paul gives them an update on his own condition to help them interpret what is going on and what they are to do in their own context. Even though there were vast distances in the Greco-Roman world, word of Paul being imprisoned would have made its way to all the churches he served. People may have begun to wonder the point of the Christian faith especially if it involves ending up in a Roman prison.<sup>4</sup> Will the same happen to the Philippians? How does this fit in the context of being a Christian?

Paul's response is not just to give an update. It is to be transparent and also for Paul to address how it fits in his Christian experience. Thus, he tells the Philippians why he is in prison as he preaches and encourages them to not listen to those who may disparage his name for being in prison. Instead, they are to listen to those who preach good news and about the love of Christ. Paul makes it clear that those who judge or preach against others are not motivated by love, but by their own desires. Through it all, Paul will be resilient and be who God has called him to be.

Paul tells Philippians that he will be glad with what is to come and that he is hopeful for the future. While there may be the fear as his fate is decided upon others, it will not stop Paul from believing and knowing that he belongs to Christ. Paul says this as a soliloquy of sorts and to give those reading and listening a sense of how he feels in this

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, "Philippians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1985), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 24.

time of uncertainty.<sup>5</sup> Paul's words are meant to console the Philippians and also model to the congregation how to handle uncertainty over the future.

### **Application**

When I read this passage I imagine Paul writing from the cellar of a prison with little light and dank air. He is dependent upon others to get his messages and even for people to feed him. He has no clue what will happen to him or what will happen to his congregations. It's not a pretty picture.

Yet as I read this passage I also imagine other situations. There is the widow who has just lost her husband of fifty years. There's the man in the prime of his career who has just lost his job or been put on probation. There's the first year college student who was a straight A student in high school, but is now struggling with the demands of academia and is failing a college course. Things don't look pretty or hopeful for those individuals either.

Yet in the midst of Paul's situation we see someone who is bold about the truth and where he finds hope. He stands up for himself and models for the Philippian congregation a defense of who he is and what he represents. He gives them the ability to do the same. They are to say no to the haters and those who seem to enjoy drama and destroying others. He continues to rest on his assurance that no one will bring him down. He does not deny that he is in prison or dealing with pain, but he will not be a defeatist victim.

I wonder if Paul's model is one that we should emulate. At times in life we will find ourselves in a prison of sorts, often time with things that may be out of our control. Death will claim our loved ones. Unfair bosses and broken business systems will corner us. New situations will press us to our limits. We will deal with bullies and people who are just flat out mean.

Yet in this passage we are reminded that with the pain, we can own things like our anger, our sadness, our sense of justice, and our vision of hope. We can be angry about death and lament for a time period. We can leave that job or find ways to confront those broken policies at work. We can grow and adapt in new situations and reach out for help. In the midst of it all, we can be who God has called us to be and to delight that we belong to the living Christ. We can speak with boldness and speak truth to power banishing fear and a defeatist mentality. In the immortal words of the modern poet Taylor Swift we can "shake it off" because the "players gonna play, haters gonna hate, heartbreakers gonna break, fakers gonna fake." We cannot control others and some of our situations. But we can control how we act and how we respond as followers of Christ. That is good news to live by and helps us to see that loving Christ also involves ourselves and remembering that we are a child of God.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

